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講談社
“ただそれでも、できることは
全部やりたくなるじゃない”
美しき吸血鬼と出逢った春夜から、
怪異に曳かれつづけた阿良々木暦。
立ち止まれぬまま十二ヵ月はめぐり
〈物語〉は、ついに運命の朝を迎える――!
怪異!
怪異!
怪異!
これぞ現代の
青春に、予定調和はおこらない。
Illustration／VOFAN
西尾維新
NISIOISIN
暦物語
100パーセント
突然書かれた
小説です。
西尾維新
KODANSHA BOX
KODANSHA BOX
西尾維新アニメプロジェクト
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2013年7月より
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第二話 こよみフラワー

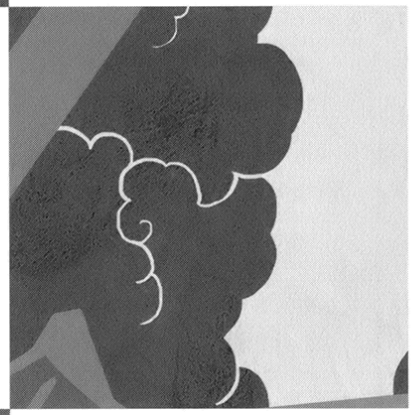
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第八話 こよみマウンテン

第九話 こよみトーラス

第十話 こよみシード





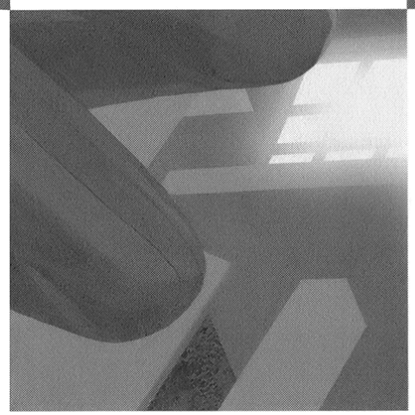


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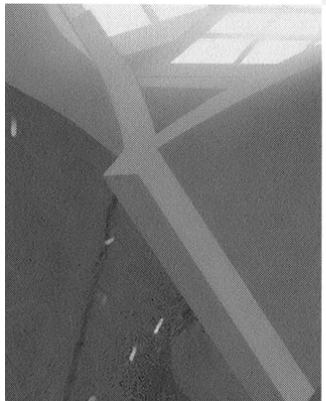
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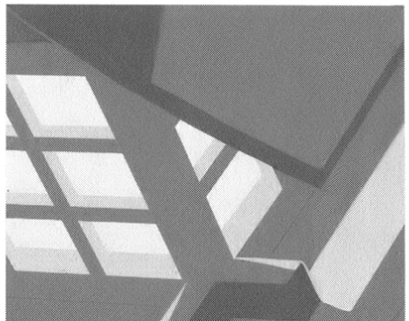
第五話 こよみウインド



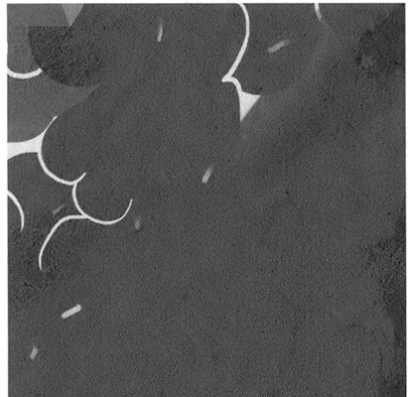


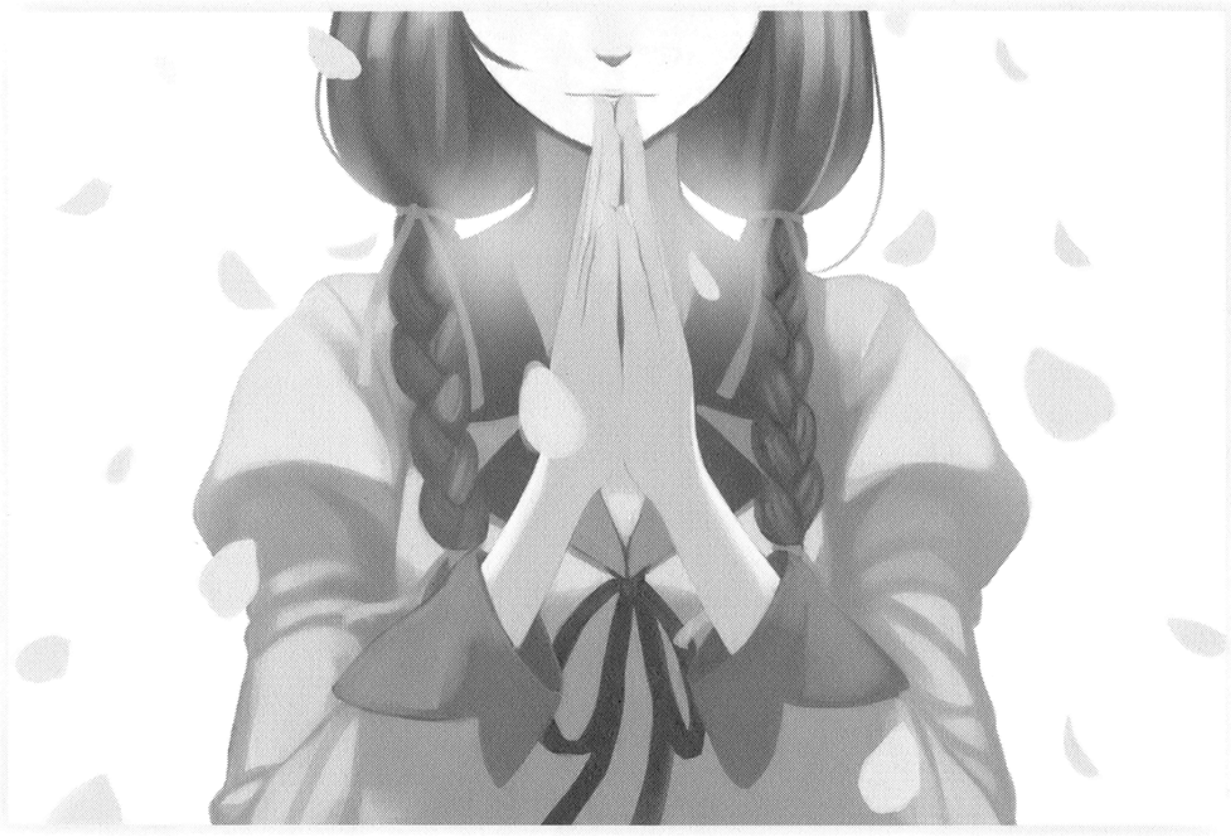
第十一話 こよみナッシング

第十二話 こよみデッド



第六話 こよみツリー





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4
April

Koyomi Stone

001

In early April, when I had just gotten to know Hanekawa Tsubasa and become her classmate, if I were to talk about with what feelings I attended school, with what feelings I walked down down that road to school, I can only say that I had no feelings about it.

I had no feelings with which I walked that road.

I didn't even think of the road as a concrete object.

Specifically, I just could not understand the reason for attending school.

I would be woken up by my sisters, change into my school uniform, get on my bike, and head towards the prestigious Naoetsu Private High School—I had already spent two years repeating that same routine, almost as if it was homework for me to do everyday, but I had never once considered whether or not there was any meaning to it.

Or rather, I did consider it, but because it was a problem that was completely impossible to solve, I gave up on thinking about it long ago.

But, well, the majority of teenagers in high school in Japan were the same, or thought to be the same, so I didn't think of myself as anyone special—after finishing compulsory education, it wasn't exactly necessary to attend school anymore, so many just couldn't come up with the vastly abstract meaning, let alone the concrete one, of a life where they underwent a higher education of their own free will. Most of them were probably very reluctant.

In the eyes of the small minority of fulfilled high school students with their feet firmly planted in the ground, it was fine for an apparition-like outsider like me to be befuddled like this on a daily basis when presented with school.

Although, it wasn't like I was unhappy.

I wouldn't become unhappy just because I inadvertently thought about that for a tiny bit—after all, if I wasn't attending school, then there would neither be anything I wanted to do nor anything I was capable of doing.

I had nothing—and it was because I had nothing that,

The fact that I was a high schooler,

The place called 'school',

Was something that could guarantee that I was still me.

And that's especially because, if it's worth mentioning, of the spring break just before the start of my third year in high school—that spring break was a hellish experience for me.

I saw into the depths of hell, and it almost made me feel as if I would forget that I was a mere high school student, or that I would never be able to attend school again.

It was a spring break that made me understand more than I wanted to that those cliches like “being normal is being happy” and “ordinary days are the best” were right after all—and because of that, the guarantee of school was something that saved me. But in spite of it all, in April, why did I proceed towards school on my bicycle as if it was natural? Why did I go to school as if it was some sort of established rule—and then why did I take my lessons, and return home? I asked myself those questions.

It was strange.

After experiencing that kind of hell, I should fully have realized the blessing of those ordinary days, and cherish each and every day from then on—but after returning from that hell, all that was left was just me.

Just like the saying “danger past and God forgotten,” I guess for me, the danger has passed and the hell that I experienced has been forgotten.

But either way, I decided to ask Hanekawa for advice.

I asked her if I was just some wooden, stony, apathetic person with no feelings and no appreciation of the blessings and virtues of my everyday life—and when I did so she answered as such.

With that calm and collected smile that always made me wonder if she knew everything, she told me this.

"Well, of course, Araragi-kun. Your everyday life is naturally something that just ‘is’, and you can’t feel the ‘blessings’ and ‘virtues’ for a thing that ‘is’. To walk down a road that’s just there is natural."

002

”Huh? A stone?”

"Yes. A stone."

"By a stone… Do you mean the kind you find on streets? Or do you mean, like, a jewel?"

"No, there’s no way it could be a jewel, you know."

Even if you say that there’s no way, I still haven’t fully grasped the subject yet, so it wasn’t like I could know what was and what wasn’t possible.

If I may say so, this was completely incomprehensible.

But it wasn’t like I wanted it to be incomprehensible—I’m no good with being confused. So I decided to try to straighten things out one at a time. That was how you got things organized, after all.

Today was the eleventh of April, and we were in a classroom after school—the classroom had no one but the two of us, who were meeting to discuss the class get-together that

would be taking place next week. As for why Hanekawa and I were having this meeting, that would be because I was the assistant class representative, and Hanekawa was the class representative. Well, originally each's group leader (or other representative) was also supposed to participate, but there was some important business that they may or may not have had, so every one of them, without exception, did not come.

Having important business was probably a complete lie, but the problem with this low participation was that they were definitely feeling secure in thinking that 'everything will be fine for the most part if we leave it to Hanekawa', which made it seem like Hanekawa's excellence was a crime. Or even a felony.

Her excellence made it so that she could easily not pay any attention to burdensome people like me, so she was really unknowingly spoiling everyone around her—but as for me, I wasn't unhappy with the situation, as it allowed me to speak privately with Hanekawa.

It didn't mean that everyone was just heartless; after all, Naoetsu High was a college-prep school, and certainly almost all the third-years were preparing for entrance exams. It was a tense mood that wasn't exactly fitting for a class get-together, and such a risky atmosphere was pretty uncomfortable for a dunce like me.

In other words, rather than being happy at being alone with Hanekawa, I was more happy that I could avoid all those tense students—and Hanekawa, who could easily ace any exam for any school even if she took it tomorrow, was just indifferent to the tension.

Well, in terms of indifference, then I, completely uninterested in entrance exams with even graduation being uncertain for me, was also indifferent to the tension, so perhaps Hanekawa and I were in fact the two best choices to be gathered here for this meeting.

But since I was also a rather reluctant person by nature, I probably would have gone home if I had had any important business to do, but I unfortunately had free time on my hands. I had so much free time I could have died. But rather than quarreling with my sisters at home, I felt that being able to talk to Hanekawa was, to some extent, much more lively for me.

And so, during that meeting.

Or perhaps I should say, during the chat we were having after finishing up with our original topic.

"The stone,"

she said.

Hanekawa was the one to bring it up.

"Well, there's this stone."

"...Okay, so, what's with the stone? Huh?"

A stone.

Or did she mean willpower? (stone and willpower are both pronounced 'ishi')

Was she going to say something like Araragi-kun is weak-willed?—although, it couldn't have been the start of a sudden flow of criticisms at my way of life. Our meeting had been proceeding smoothly so far.

"Well, about the stone… You know?"

Hanekawa said.

For some reason, she was speaking unusually vaguely—or rather, you might say she hadn't made up her mind about how to describe "that".

She was hesitating.

She was hesitating in her judgment—or that may not be the case.

It just wasn't the time to decide what 'that' was, nor was it the time to call 'that' by anything, so she didn't dare decide.

That's why, she so vaguely—calls it a stone.

It felt something like that.

"Well, if I have to call it something—I guess a stone statue?"

"A stone statue?"

"No, I don't really think it's a stone statue, though."

"……"

"That's why it's only if I have to call it something. Hmm, well,"

Ehehe, went Hanekawa with a smile.

It was really cute, but it felt like she commanded herself to do so, in order to laugh away the subject. I was by no means reluctant to let her do so, but I had gotten interested in this 'stone (possibly stone statue)'.

"Hey, Hanekawa. What do you mean by stone?"

"Aah, it's fine. It's not good to ask other people about something when I don't understand it myself, right?"

"That's being overly wise!"

If you don't understand something then just ask someone else.

Don't you know the saying, "Better to ask the way than go astray"?—though, there's no way Hanekawa wouldn't know any of the sayings that I knew.

"Just that, well, it was Oshino-san's job to gather these kinds of stories, right?—or so I was thinking."

"These kinds of stories?"

"Urban legends. Street rumors. Idle gossip—"

Hanekawa said so, as if counting off her fingers.

"—If that's the case, then I was thinking maybe the seven wonders of the school would be like those."

"Seven wonders? Eh?"

"No, no, it's not really the seven wonders. Just, well, this place we call school can be a treasure trove for kaidan and ghost stories, can't it? Like maybe it used to be a graveyard, or there was an air raid during the war, those kinds of—"

"Eh? Naoetsu High has that kind of history?

"Not really."

What's with that.

Well, I myself didn't know anything about the school's history—though not knowing about the origins of the school I attend could be dangerous to say, now that I think about it. That is, I would be going to a place I didn't know very well with feelings I didn't know very well.

As if it was natural.

That's—too many things I wouldn't know very well.

"Haah… I wonder if my thoughtlessness regarding this school of mine could be the first of the seven wonders…"

"No way, that's not cool at all."

I was shut down by Hanekawa.

That didn't make me particularly happy.

Maybe the joke didn't get through?—but despite Hanekawa's serious personality, she wasn't the kind of person to not get humor, so that would mean it simply had not been funny, which would make me less unhappy and more shocked.

And even putting that aside, what guy would be happy if a girl told him that he wasn't cool?

"It's not at the level to be called thoughtlessness, and besides, it would be weird for it to become the first, right?"

She continued to find fault in it.

Instead of shutting me down, it felt like I was being tutored.

I appreciated her attitude of "if I have to correct someone I may as well do it thoroughly", but I never wanted to have that arrow pointed at me.

Or rather, I was completely against it, but either way, I disliked it.

And, well, instead of disliking it, you could say it made me give up on all hope.

"The construction of the buildings and such is relatively new, so it's nothing like those old schools that were there from before the war, either."

I wonder if there was anything in the school pamphlets that said how old the school was? If there was, I couldn't remember it… Not to mention that I never had any interest in something like that in the first place.

"Well, there may have been an older school system before it, but Naoetsu High's history is only 18 years. This year it's 18 years old. The same age as us."

"Heh… That's…"

That's older than I thought, was what I was going to say, but if I take into account the fact that it was the same age as Hanekawa and I were, then it might not actually be very old.

But really, that's Hanekawa for you.

Unlike me, she had properly looked into the history and origins of the school she was attending—probably, when she was in her third year of middle school, during entrance exams, she decided to look into the details of what kind of place the high school she was going to attend was like.

No, it's possible that, even before that, she had known it as part of her general knowledge—either way, she was a rather undesirable middle-schooler.

"Hmm? What were you going to say?"

"Well, it makes it sound only half-finished."

"Ahaha. That's may be so. But, it really doesn't have enough history for there to be any sort of seven wonders—since there doesn't seem to be any stories like a student dying from an accident or anything."

"There doesn't seem to be any…"

That's.

That's very, well, how should I put it—it's the life and death of a person. It's not the kind of thing you would research during entrance exams, nor is it something that would be part of general knowledge.

I felt like it was information that you couldn't get without considerably loosening the strings of the eighteen years of this school's history—

"In any case, how should I say this. Kaidan that seems like kaidan—ghost stories that seem like ghost stories—are not the stories you'd find in Naoetsu High—is what I'd say."

"Hmm… Well, I haven't heard anything in particular, either."

Especially since, in my case, I had from the beginning chosen to distance myself from the gossip that flew around between students.

So-and-so is going out with so-and-so, or so-and-so had a fight with so-and-so—those hot topics were things I didn't really want to think about.

It's not like I wanted to revolt against the information-rich world of today, but I just didn't want to seem like I was a person well-informed in such matters. That's for sure. It was a stance where I wanted to live isolated from the news.

Although on the other hand, I had ended up being on close terms with someone like Hanekawa who 'knew everything', so my attitude towards this was pretty irresponsible.

"Um… What were we talking about anyway? We've rambled on for a quite a bit, so I've ended up not being able to follow along…"

"Eh? Come on, Araragi-kun, I've told you already. The stone—"

"What I don't understand is the stone! I want you to explain everything properly."

"I've been doing that, haven't I?"

Hanekawa said so with a blank expression.

Well, surely Hanekawa had the intention of doing so—she was trying to explain everything step by step, and I'm sure that if anyone else was listening, her explanation would've been easy to understand.

However, I'm sorry to say that it was all incoherent babble to me. In conversation you had to match your level to your partner's level. From a high level to a low level, of course.

At the bare minimum, tell me clearly whether we're talking about the stone or the ghost stories.

"Mmm. Er, so you see—"

After taking my demands, Hanekawa said so looking stumped.

"—A stone kaidan?"

"?"

Kaidan, as in stairs?

003

It had nothing to do with stone stairs.

If that was the case then Hanekawa would just have used the word stairs, and the conversation would not have been so ostentatious and roundabout.

Kaidan, as in ghost story.

A stone ghost story.

Is what it was.

However, though she had called it a stone ghost story, that didn't mean that the conversation had progressed—as ever, I still didn't understand a thing.

However.

"Ah—"

However, a little after locking up the classroom, when Hanekawa led me to the courtyard at Naoetsu High, there was some progress made.

And by progress, I meant inside my own head—it wasn't that anything had actually changed.

The situation itself was as motionless as a stone.

Hanekawa had taken me to the courtyard with telling me why, so I wondered if she was taking me to the trash dump site beyond it for a moment, but our destination was the courtyard's flower bed.

No.

It was—the stone inside the flower bed.

Though, like a stone, it didn't move or anything.

"—I see. But, well… I wouldn't call this either a "stone" or a "stone statue"… Well…"

I could certainly understand why Hanekawa had kept herself to such a vague description—in the courtyard's flower bed (which I would even call a flower bed of mystery because I didn't know who was taking care of it) there was that stone.

Stone.

If I forced it then maybe it could be a stone statue—but, that was only what Hanekawa had said after I pressed her, so it really was forced, for it did not look like a 'statue'.

The stone seemed to have just flopped down there.

In itself, it was just a stone—but, whether it was forced or not, I could see the reason for describing it as a stone statue.

And that is because, the stone had been dedicated to a small shrine—it had been dedicated, and even an offering had been politely made to it.

"……"

Well, to say "politely" might be an exaggeration. Both the way the offering was made and the way the shrine were built had a roughness that was far from polite—that is to say, it was very unskillful. In terms of etiquette, it didn't seem like the proper procedures had been followed at all; it entirely seemed like the result of a child's work, or perhaps even child's play.

"I feel like this shrine will break into pieces just by kicking it…"

"To kick a shrine, Araragi-kun, is an incredible idea…"

You'll receive divine punishment, said Hanekawa.

Well, it was as Hanekawa said—due to what happened over spring break, my ideas may in fact be tinged with violence.

But whether I would be punished or not, though the shrine built from wood and nails might easily break to pieces if I struck it, it wouldn't actually be a good idea due to the stone enshrined inside.

It's possible that I myself would break a bone.

The stone wasn't so large that I would call it a boulder, but it wasn't really a pebble that I could send flying either.

Since it wasn't like I was carrying a tape measure around with me, I couldn't get an accurate measurement, but it was approximately the same size as a rugby ball.

A very rough rugby ball—and for that matter a slightly dirty rugby ball as well. With that size, I could imagine that it was too heavy for a girl like Hanekawa to pick up—it's possible that even a guy like me wouldn't be able to pick it up, but I didn't want to try.

I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of Hanekawa.

I was a pretty vain high schooler.

"Hanekawa. Is this the stone you were talking about?"

"Yes. That's right."

"Um—"

The conversation stopped after Hanekawa nodded. But in this case, it was up to me to continue it, so what would be a good question to ask?

"—This offering, is it your doing, Hanekawa?"

"Of course not. I don't do anything like bring candy to school."

"Right..."

I think I may have led the conversation astray.

We were both in gear and yet not in gear.

But, well, regarding the candy that had been placed on the clumsily-made wooden altar, rather than whether she would or wouldn't bring it, it didn't seem like Hanekawa's style at all.

She seemed like someone who would eat something a little more sophisticated—she seemed to have the kind of lifestyle that involved high sugar consumption, and so did not mind sweets.

"So, going back to what I was saying before, what was it again—you know, we were really helped out a lot by Oshino-san over spring break, right? So I was wondering if there wasn't a way for me to show my gratitude—"

"Your gratitude..."

Well.

It wasn't really that 'we' were helped out by Oshino over spring break but me alone, and as for that, I was charged a special fee (a total of 5 million yen), so Hanekawa having to consider 'showing her gratitude' towards Oshino-san did not stand to reason; but in that way, she was a rather unreasonable girl.

If I had to say it, then the one who should be thinking about showing gratitude would be none other than me, towards Hanekawa—though, it's not like I had never thought about it, since it was for that reason I had taken up the ill-suited position of assistant class representative... I wonder if even being brought to the courtyard was, from the start, a result of me wanting to 'do something' for Hanekawa's benefit?

Thinking like that made me feel a bit empty inside.

Without knowing that I was thinking such things—well, it's possible she knew even that—Hanekawa continued her explanation.

"—So, Oshino-san was collecting stories about oddities, right? That's Oshino-san's occupation… or rather, his job, right?"

"Job? Does that guy even work? Though now that you mention it, I remember hearing him say something about collecting stories about oddities or whatever… But if I had to say it, isn't it more like a hobby?"

I couldn't imagine that he was doing anything like writing a book and presenting it at an academic conference, or anything that required him to look ahead into the future. Especially because he had no permanent home, and was living that kind of unsteady life day by day, after all…

"Collecting stories about oddities definitely wouldn't bring money, right? It wouldn't help the economy one bit."

"Working doesn't always mean earning money, Araragi-kun."

"……"

Her statement was heavy.

Was this something a high school student would say?—but on the other hand, it could be something said because she was a high school student. But even so, I thought, wow, Hanekawa was able to say something like that even before she began working herself.

"Well, back to my point. Let's see. So, if Naoetsu High had the seven wonders or some other things like 'school ghost stories', I was wondering if it would do to tell him about those. To show my gratitude."

"Can that really… show your gratitude? I don't want to put a damper on your feelings or anything… but for the oddities that Oshino collects, aren't they something more typical? Like vampires…"

"It's really limiting to say that 'school ghost stories' aren't typical. For that matter, from a popularity standpoint, 'school ghost stories' are the elite in the oddity world. There may not be a lot of people who know the 'Cackling Woman', but everyone knows about 'Hanako-san in the Toilet', right?"

"Well… If the barometer for oddities is whether it's well known or not, then that would make high popularity really important…"

It seemed like there was a cultural paradox there.

If it became too popular, then it could be linked to being insignificant and cheap… and be way off from being advanced.

"It's because they're so well-known that you can tie them to urban legends and street gossip… But that's the problem, I guess. Like… If everyone knows about it, then there's no meaning to rumors, or something."

"But I don't think Oshino-san is really looking for something advanced, you know? Gossip is, after all, part of popular culture."

"Hm. That may be so, but I dunno. I have no intention to make light of your feelings or anything, but if you took ‘school ghost stories’ to him, wouldn’t he just laugh at you?"

"Oshino-san isn’t that kind of person."

"....."

Personally, I thought he was in fact ‘that kind of person’, but apparently Hanekawa thought differently.

"No, that’s not what I mean. Well, basically, Hanekawa, what I want to say is, I don’t think Oshino-san is really looking for those popular ‘school ghost stories’ that everyone knows… Since it’s natural for someone to have that knowledge, I would think he already knows about it, right?"

"I wonder about that. It is, of course, possible that he does know about it, but ‘school ghost stories’ have some variation with each school, and—after you become an adult, it’s harder to get into school, isn’t it? So they become ghost stories that are harder to collect for an adult like Oshino-san, was what I was thinking—"

"Harder to collect—"

Ah.

So that was it—for a high schooler like me who went to school as if it was ‘the norm’, it didn’t make sense to me at first, but for an outsider, and especially for an adult, the school was like a closed area that would be hard to get into.

And particularly for an adult like Oshino… For an adult with no job that seemed like a job, and no home that seemed like a home, it was quite possible that he would be reported as soon as he took even one step onto the premises.

That’s why, if he wanted to investigate the stories of oddities within the school, he would have to eavesdrop on the students that attend it, but that was more the actions of a suspicious person.

It’s not like there would be television programs on it, and if he said he suggested a formal data collection he would most likely be turned down…

"I see. So, Hanekawa, you were going to investigate these ‘school ghost stories’ and then personally hand them over to him."

"Saying that I’ll hand them over to him sounds so rude—I’ll be informing him about them. But it’s just as you said, Araragi-kun, that Oshino-san might not actually need them. But even so, don’t you want to at least do everything that you can possibly do?"

"…No, I’m not really proactive about my life."

Rather than wanting to do everything that I can possibly do, I want to avoid doing everything that I can possibly avoid doing. That was basically the guideline for my life.

But really, sighed Hanekawa.

"It’s just as I said earlier. I looked into it, but I can’t say that this Naoetsu High School that we attend has any deep history to it, so nothing like a ghost story has had a chance to form—ah, I thought this was going to be a swing and a miss."

Hanekawa used words like a swing and a miss naturally.

Surely, for Hanekawa who ‘wants to do everything she can possibly do’, she has experienced a countless number of ‘swings and misses’ in her life—well, I thought it was almost heretical for her to keep getting ‘swings and misses’ as well as ‘big hits’ without losing hope at all.

I think Oshino said something to that effect before—what did he say again?

"But even so, there was something that I found interesting. Well, instead of it being something I found interesting—for some reason or other, I wanted it to be interesting.

"…? And that’s this stone? Or stone statue."

As I said that, I looked at it again.

I could only see it as a normal stone—but, because it was decorated with a shrine and offerings, I felt like it was a ‘blessing’, or some sort of miraculous stone.

And it was possible to start seeing it as a statue that had been sculpted to look just like that.

Ah, speaking of which—regarding miracles, I’m not exactly an expert on this and it might be a bit stupid to say, but aren’t there stories about ‘power stones’ that can give you protection just from carrying them?

Though ‘power stones’ and ‘power spots’ and those kinds of stories might in actuality be different stories of oddities.

"Mm… yes. That’s it."

"So in other words, out of the various things you looked into, you found this mysterious stone in the middle of the flower bed of this courtyard—but you weren’t able to find anything about it when you looked further?"

For now I tried organizing the situation up until now inside my head. Keeping things in order was not my strong point, but I, who hated when things were a chaotic mess, had a habit of wanting to have things easy to understand. Though I knew that having things easy to understand wasn’t connected to knowing the truth.

In contrast, Hanekawa’s ability to process information was off by a digit, or maybe by a unit, so she could interact thinking that this situation ‘already in order’.

"That’s not it."

And so she readily and gently denied my conclusion.

It made me wonder whether her room was actually a bit of a mess. Then again, it’s not just Hanekawa, but lots of geniuses have rooms that may be kind of messy.

Though that’s being rather narrow-minded of me…

"In the first place, I knew that this stone was here from a while ago."

"…You know everything, don’t you?"

"I don’t know everything. I just know what I know."

Hanekawa responded immediately.

"But it wasn't like this earlier,"

she continued.

"It wasn't like this earlier?"

"From my first year at school—that is, when I had just enrolled here, right? I tried looking into the school for a bit."

"Why did you even do something like that…"

"Well, I just thought that I wanted to know what kind of place the school you were going to spend the next three years in was. You could say I was curious."

"Well, instead of curious…"

Instead of curious, I would call it more eccentric.

It had passed the behavior of a mere honors student—she must have looked into Naoetsu High in detail during entrance exams, and it was the eccentricity of a genius that transgressed the bounds of my imagination.

But anyway, it was neither the time nor the place to talk about something like that.

"So around two years ago, your investigation…. or, I guess, when you explored the school, in this flower bed, there wasn't a stone here?"

"No, no. Listen to me. The stone was there. I almost tripped over it, so I remember it clearly."

"Tripped? Eh? Do you actually trip over things?"

"What do you think I am, Araragi-kun…"

She looked at me with an exasperated face.

Frankly.

She actually hated to be treated like an honors student or some kind of superwoman.

"It's possible for me to almost trip over things, you know."

"Is that so… That's a surprise."

Well, I guess you could say that she managed to trip over a pebble like me and run into all sorts of trouble over spring break, so I couldn't call her perfect.

However, the fact that she said 'almost' means that we should be careful to note that she didn't actually trip.

"Anyway, if the stone was there then there's no problem, right?"

"Like I said, that's not it. The stone was there—but the shrine wasn't."

"?"

"The offerings weren't there either, and neither was the altar."

In other words, somebody had to have done it, says Hanekawa.

"Somebody—within these two years, somebody decorated this stone or stone statue-like object—and perhaps we could say that they enshrined it."

"....."

004

That night.

I headed towards an abandoned building.

It was the ruins of a cram school that had closed down a few years ago—the fact that it was using the entire building might mean that it was a cram school of some greatness, but it had been no match for the fiery aggression of a prep school that moved into the area in front of the station, and so I've heard lots of things like it retreated or escaped through the night, but either way I don't know the truth.

Well.

I wonder.

With that in mind, I was walking from a high school whose history I didn't know very well to an abandoned building whose history I didn't know very well, and I was following a path that was actually a bit unclear without any sense of danger, and I was actually kind of astounded.

However, I wasn't anyone like Hanekawa Tsubasa, and I didn't want to know about it to the point that I would look into it.

"Yo, Araragi-kun—I've been waiting."

Said Oshino.

The specialist Oshino Meme greeted me with that usual, innocent-sounding line—in a classroom on the fourth floor.

In a corner of the classroom was a small blonde girl, but I'll leave out the description of that.

I told Oshino about the situation.

Although, I wouldn't say that I didn't add some things to make it sound more dramatic.

"Hm. A stone, eh?"

Said Oshino—said this old guy in a Hawaiian shirt.

"It's easy for stones to become the object of religious worship, you know—Araragi-kun, though the power stones that you talk about may have a different sort of influence, they're fundamentally the same."

"Hmm... So, when people say that magical power dwells in jewels and such, is that the same thing?"

"Well, nowadays—the fact that people are fascinated by jewels in modern society is more due to their value than their appearance—"

Oshino laughed lightly.

He was acting as if he was messing around, which honestly was the type of person I didn't like.

But Oshino Meme was by no means some old guy who messed around—he was an old guy that had saved my life, my dignity, and my humanity.

Though he seemed like he had been messing around all the same.

"So you said that this stone was as big as a rugby ball, right? Then, in what way was that rugby ball enshrined?"

"In what way?"

"Vertical? Horizontal? You can orient a rugby ball in those two ways, right?"

"Ah..."

I was thinking that he was asking about an insignificant detail, but since I came in place of Hanekawa, who would have properly explained even those insignificant things, I guess it was my mistake.

As I thought, it would've been better if Hanekawa had come here herself, but there was no state of emergency, and I had the good sense not to lead healthy young girls around late at night.

"It felt like a Jizou statue. ...If you include the shrine, it's very possible that it was actually trying to imitate a Jizou statue...what was it again? Jizou were, like, Buddhist gods, right?"

"You know a lot, for someone like you."

"Don't say it like that."

Don't say it so naturally, either.

But, well, I can't deny that it was information that I only happened to have in hand, not to mention that that was the end of the information that I could provide.

I don't even know for sure what a Jizou is a god of in Buddhism.

"Um... Was he a god that protects roads? No, but I've heard of the Six Jizou before... Huh? And there's also the Kasajizou..."

It seemed that the more I spoke, the more the true nature of my knowledge was revealed.

"Haha. In Japan, the Jizou is the guardian deity of travelers, but there are times where more than one come together as well—well, it's still weird for one to be in a flower bed."

Unusually, Oshino didn't make fun of my hasty behavior, and rather spoke as if he was following what I said.

"A stone statue,"

he said.

"When you call it a stone statue, do you mean that it actually looked like that? Rather than a simple circle, it looked carved, or it looked like it was shaped like a person—"

"No, well… In my case, I was given some preconceptions by Hanekawa, but if you ask then I guess I did see it that way, but… But, I guess, objectively, if I had just happened to pass by that flower bed and see that stone—I would think it was just a boring old stone."

"Heh."

"Well, no."

Seeing Oshino's annoying smile, I shook my head.

"I might be wrong—if I had just happened to pass by that flower bed, and heard nothing about it before, and it was enclosed in that wooden shrine with an altar built for it, then I might think it had definitely been carved like that like a statue—"

"The simulacrum phenomenon."

"Eh?"

"When humans see something that looks like a face, then they're only able to see it as a face—like if they look at a stain on the wall or some dirt, they'll pick out a human shape. I guess you could say it's like in old times when people thought they saw ghosts but they were actually will-o'-the-wisps?"

"Seeing ghosts—are you saying that oddities and stories about them fit with that whatchamacallit phenomenon?"

"No, no, that and this are different things—for later, Araragi-kun. But for now, even if you called that stone a stone statue, that doesn't mean that it has to be carved. It's possible that it was eroded into that shape naturally by the rain and wind, right?"

"Erosion, huh."

"How about it? In that case, the undecorated stone that your lovable friend said she saw two years ago—had it changed from that time?"

"She said it hadn't changed."

In the first place, a normal person wouldn't have even remembered the shape of a stone that they had almost tripped over, let alone the stone itself, but Hanekawa Tsubasa was not a normal person.

She had said that, though it may have changed in color, the stone had not changed in shape from looking like a rugby ball in those two years.

In other words, in those two years, though someone may have decorated its exterior, the stone itself had not been altered in any way.

"Hm. So, what's Miss Class Rep's opinion?"

"By her opinion—"

Oshino called Hanekawa "Miss Class Rep".

For her who hated being treated like an honors student, I'm sure it was a nickname that she wouldn't be happy about, but since the person responsible was Oshino, she would probably accept it without complaints.

Incidentally, I once called her "Miss Class Rep" as a joke, but she got so angry it frightened me. I thought I would never recover from that.

"Hanekawa, well, since she saw the stone when it hadn't been decorated, at that time she probably thought it was just a stone. But this time, Oshino, she went and began investigating her school in order to show her gratitude to you—and realized that things had changed since two years ago. And she thought it was really ominous—or something."

"Ominous—is that so."

Oshino repeated my words.

"Well, if she thought that it had just been a stone, and then it showed up deified in some shrine, then I guess it would be ominous—but to think that Miss Class Rep would ever find anything ominous, haha, I never would have guessed it."

"It's not something to laugh at."

This may be because of how Hanekawa had told the story—but, really,the fact that some weird religion had started up within the school had a kind of ominousness to it, or at least it was something that was hard to overlook.

Even I, who had no sense of belonging to the school, thought that way.

"Well—first of all, I'd like to start by looking into the origins of those cheap sweets that had been offered, but about Miss Class Rep. I bet that she's already done it without being told to, right?"

"....."

As usual, he said things as if he'd seen through everything.

That is, what Oshino said about Hanekawa put my mind on edge—it was a strange feeling. Oshino seemed to know Hanekawa even though they had only just met, and I had known Hanekawa for a few days longer than he had.

And I didn't know anything about Hanekawa at all.

"Yeah. She looked at the maker and counted back from the expiration date to find when it was sold, found the shop it was sold at, and isolated the students that seemed like they would buy it—"

"She's makes a great detective, doesn't she? Does she eavesdrop or anything?"

"No, I don't think she's gone that far yet."

"Don't you think she's gone a bit far already?"

"This is different."Through the investigation, it seems that it wasn't one person that made offerings, but a number of people that brought those cheap sweets and left them at

the shrine—and once she learned that, she didn't expand the investigation any further, since she decided not to move around in secret."

"....."

"Well, in any case, I brought this to you because she thought you'd like this kind of thing. It's Hanekawa's way of showing her gratitude for taking care of her."

For the time being, I decided to wrap it up by saying what I needed to say.

Well, I wasn't sure whether it was wrapped up or not, but the reason I had come to Oshino's place anyway was not to consult him about the mysterious stone in our school, but to express my feelings on the weird incident that had occurred at school.

If I didn't emphasize that, it was quite possible for the debt I already had would increase even more. Well, I still hadn't paid a good part of my debt of five million yen, so even if it increased more, I probably wouldn't mind.

Thinking about it, once the debt gets above a certain point, the debtor wouldn't get any more desperate, since he couldn't pay it back anyway, and he would stop thinking about opposing an increase in his debt in the end. It's possible that I myself was just above that border line—or so I thought, but honestly, I didn't want to take on any debt higher than this.

So, since it was hard for me to risk a consultation fee, I could not avoid acting somewhat, or rather completely, patronizing to him.

"Haha—"

As if he had completely seen through my intentions, he pretended to laugh.

Hanekawa had talked about the youkai story of the 'Cackling Woman', andOshino's laugh made me wonder whether that youkai laughed the same way.

"Wh-what is it?"

I said, pretending to be confused.

No, if he had really seen through me, then it wouldn't be a pretense, and I would actually be perplexed—

"A-as I thought, a specialist like you has no interest in something like school ghost stories, huh? Surely you'd rather have some complicated story that's grounded on literature, right?"

"No, no, Miss Class Rep's understanding was correct— even the range of expertise of an all-rounder like me has its strong points and weak points. The stories of a closed area like a school are pretty hard to gather—so it's an offer that I'm thankful for."

"I-it is, isn't it?"

"But, you see, Araragi-kun. This is a favor from Miss Class Rep, not a favor from you, so your debt isn't going to be lowered from just this one case. I'll be looking forward to that, too."

"....."

Well.

I'm satisfied if my debt isn't going to increase.

It wasn't that I hadn't been expecting it—but it was a good place to compromise on.

"It's hard to call this an oddity story, but, haha, I got a good story anyway. I'll document it properly, okay?"

"...Oshino. I'd just like to ask for reference, but with those 'stories' that you're collecting, what do you plan to do with those in the end, once you're done collecting them?"

"Hm?"

"Er... So you see, are you going to write a book, or present it at an academic conference... Do you have any plans like that?"

I didn't need to confirm what I thought about when I talked with Hanekawa after school, but since I had the chance I thought I would ask.

I'm at least interested in that much.

In other words, was this man, or should I say my benefactor, actually collecting these stories for his occupation, or was he actually jobless and just calling his hobby a job?...

"Haha. I'm not exactly an authority on the study of oddities, or do anything so refined like that. Well, I do sell the stories I collect to people that want them."

"You sell them? Are there actually buyers? For stuff like ghost stories."

"It's really something for you to say that about ghost stories. Especially because you were a main character for one yourself."

"...Incidentally, how much do you sell them for?"

"Haha. Isn't it better for the buyer to name his price to the seller?"

"....."

Well, if you say that then I don't have a choice but to back off, but being able to take consultation fees and settle matters on oddities and then sell those stories about oddities elsewhere was, well, a tantalizing occupation to have, or so I thought.

I could make a good profit, couldn't I.

Of course, to an ordinary person it wouldn't seem that tantalizing... But anyway, well, knowing that Oshino's collecting is connected to his income is enough for me.

"But is this story something that someone would want to buy?"

"Good question. 'That person' seems like they want everything—recently, it seems that person is doing things they don't know about, so the right thing to do would be to keep my distance. Well, I guess I can't sell it to 'that guy'—"

It seemed Oshino had already started to form his plan to make money from this, but I thought he was being a bit too hasty, like he was counting his chickens before they were hatched.

A story that was just about how a weird stone had been enshrined in the flower bed of a school didn't have anything going for it at all—it literally didn't make a good story.

I guess it's because he was able to somehow find an explanation for it is what made him a specialist.

"So, how about it, Oshino?"

"Hm? What do you mean, how about it?"

"Well, it might be an awkward question if I asked again, but… As a specialist, what do you think of this case?"

Listing all the unclear points in order, I repeated my question.

"What should've been the stone it was two years ago became some sort of religious faith of a group of students—an unknown number of people—so is it possible it'll become something like an oddity?"

"It's rarer than rare for an object to become an oddity—originally, oddities always had some sort of basis, and those were always living things. However…"

"Hm?"

"It's hard to tell if it's worshiped because it's an oddity—or if it became an oddity because it was worshiped."

"If it's worshiped because it's an oddity, or if it became an oddity because it's being worshiped?"

I had only intended to meekly repeat Oshino's words, but there must have been a discrepancy somewhere, so I was met with a

"No, that's wrong."

from Oshino.

"It's not 'if it became an oddity because it's being worshiped'. It's—'if it's worshiped because it's an oddity, or if it became an oddity because it was worshiped'."

"…? Ah, well, there's a small difference in the wording, but… Is that really a difference worth pointing out?"

"In this case, yes,"

he said, meaningfully, before saying.

"But, it's hard to understand just from hearing you talk about it. Araragi-kun, couldn't you draw a picture for me?"

he asked.

"Eh?"

"Yeah. If you came here straight from school, you should have some paper and a pencil with you, right?"

"Well, I do, but…"

I never thought that I would be demanded to draw a picture when I came here. But, it wasn't like I couldn't comply to what had been requested of me.

"But honestly, I don't have any artistic talent. That might come as a bit of a surprise to you."

"Didn't you learn anything in art class at school?"

"Our school is a college prep school, so there's not a lot to do in the arts. Not to mention it's only an elective, and I chose to do something other than art."

"Hmm… Well, it's all right to do a rough sketch."

"All right."

I ran a mechanical pencil down the pages of the notebook I took out. Using my memory—I can't say I would be able to remember anything that occurred two years ago, but if it's just a few hours ago, then even if I wasn't anyone like Hanekawa, my memory was good enough to remember that much.

"It was something like this, I think."

"Ah, that isn't any good."

I was criticized from the get-go.

If I had wanted to become an artist, I would have given up now.

Couldn't you at least have lied and praised me for a bit?

"Don't say it's no good. I did my best to copy down what I saw, okay? You might think the picture looks distorted or something, but it really did look like that."

"That's not what I meant. I needed you to draw the shrine and the altar, too, not just the stone."

"Hm? But—"

"Just do it."

Being forced to with no explanation, I reluctantly did as I was told. Although it wasn't like it was hard to add in the shrine and altar to the drawing—it wasn't exactly a very complex building.

It was only called a shrine because there was no other way to describe it, but it was incredibly simple, or rather if it hadn't been nailed together I would think they were just wooden blocks.

"Oho. So is this what it looked like? The shrine."

"Ah—well,"

I said when I was finished. I had wanted to show my generous intentions by drawing even the background, but I guess that would be too much.

"As for the altar, I can only say that it just looks like a common altar, or maybe just a small desk just for the sake of putting offerings on it, but as for the shrine, even while it's clumsily made, it gives me the impression that it's trying to imitate something."

"Oh?"

As Oshino scrutinized the notebook that I handed over to him, he gave that response.

"Maybe it looks like some shrine… Or maybe because of it, it looked like Jizou, the god of travelers, I don't really know… But I feel like the shape of the shrine itself brings something to mind."

"Oy, oy. Say that earlier, if you thought something like that. Or were you hiding it to try and test how much I knew?"

said Oshino while smirking.

Rather than scolding me, his tone of voice made it sound like he was making fun of me.

"Well, I was just only thinking about it in the back of my mind, and I came around to realizing it for the first time after I made that drawing. So that means—"

It's thanks to you telling me to draw a picture that made me remember it, was what I began to say, but I got flustered and stopped.

I was afraid that if I said something like "it's thanks to you" so carelessly, I would be charged a fee or something—although I didn't think Oshino was some kind of penny-pinching cheapskate or anything.

Since the subject of money had been brought up earlier, I was just being alert.

But anyway.

"—Um, anyway, I never really thought about it properly. Like I felt I had seen it before, or it wasn't the first time I had seen it… Oshino, you'd know, right? If that shrine really was imitating something—"

"No, I can't say I know. But…"

After he said however, Oshino became silent, and returned the notebook to me. To think that the work of art that I had taken the time to create had not been useful for more than 5 minutes made be a bit sad, but it's not like this was the time to appraise my art skills.

"But what? Don't just start speaking and then stop—if you think you know something, tell me about it."

I had only intended to try and get closer to the answer by thinking rationally, but since my work of art had been of little use, I couldn't help but think, "After forcing a guy with no talent to draw a picture, that's your only reaction?", and feel a bit discontent, the result being that my way of speaking became a little ruder.

But Oshino, as if ignoring my reaction and maybe even laughing it aside, said

"Haha. You sure are energetic, Araragi-kun. Did something good happen?"

in response.

"By the way, I'd like to hear what you think, Araragi-kun. By all means, I would very much like to hear the knowledgeable Araragi-kun's opinion. In what way do you perceive this case?"

"In what way… Well, you said this earlier too, but even if this is a ‘school ghost story’, I think it’s really unclear whether this is about an oddity or not, is how I feel."

"Hoh. And?"

"Well, this is just a boring, realistic interpretation, but anyway, someone, I don’t know who, just decided to enshrine a stone that had found its way into the flower bed—since, there wouldn’t be a shrine if it wasn’t made by a human, right?"

"Although, you never know if a vampire materialized it instead,"

said Oshino, looking at the small blonde girl in the corner of the classroom.

Well, I guess that’s an exception.

"But still, it has to be the work of a human, that shrine. That’s what I thought. Though I wouldn’t say I’m a hundred percent sure…"

"Hmm."

"So, in this case, somebody, or should I say several people—that is, an unknown number of students—formed a tiny little religion, or maybe a religious group, and is using that stone as an object of worship…something like that?"

I couldn’t put my thoughts into words nicely, and it was hard to express the problematic points of the case, but it really was ominous to think that there was some strange religion that had been born within the school.

It’s kind of scary.

"But we have freedom of religion, y’know. It’s in the Constitution."

"Well, of course, that may be so—but in this case, according to Hanekawa’s evidence, it’s clear that that stone being worshiped right now was just a rock two years ago. If you think of it that way, doesn’t that give you a bad feeling?"

The religious stone that opposed the fact that there were no “school ghost stories” within Naoetsu High that only had 18 years of history—it was hard to accept that it was a mere stone up until two years ago.

That’s what I think.

"Even in stories about oddities, it’s not necessarily needed for there to be any sort of history—oddities are born or brought forth one after another."

"When I say a bad feeling, I’m saying that it’s a bad feeling about there being evil intentions. I think that’s what Hanekawa is worried about. Basically, someone came up with a fake religion and a fake object of worship, and is deceiving a good number of students, or something—"

"Deceiving?"

said Oshino.

"You mean deceiving everyone out of their candy?"

"…No, well, um."

"If they're going to deceive, then I'd think they'd do a better job of doing it—I haven't looked at it directly, but using Araragi-kun's shoddy drawing, I'd say the construction of the shrine is shoddy as well. Just as shoddy as your drawing."

"Oshino. It's one thing for the person himself to say that he's bad at drawing, but if he hears it from someone else his feelings can get hurt, you know?"

Don't say it as if the crude shrine became even cruder thanks to my drawing.

"Even if someone was trying to deceive people, wouldn't they have made a better-looking shrine? By preparing the design, a person can deceive others—was what a friend of mine once said."

"You can't possibly have any friends, can you?"

"I guess so. If you think about it, he wasn't that much of a friend."

I thought I would try hurting his feelings in return, but far from his feelings being hurt, he actually had a smile on his face.

What kind of a mentality did he have, anyway? It was a mystery.

"But, in his case, it's possible that what he said was also a lie. Well, putting that aside, what's the impression you get from this, Araragi-kun?"

"Well, let's see... I guess that sounds about right. If he was trying to deceive someone, I guess he wouldn't have made something that looks so much like it was made by a kid. I wouldn't even make it myself; I might even order it from somewhere else. But in that case, does that mean it's an actual religion? Like, with a rule stating that you have to make the shrine by yourself, or something. Um, but, no matter how much religious freedom there may be, starting up a new religion within a school sounds just a bit..."

Not to mention that in that case, it's still doubtful as to why they chose some stone that had just fallen there. It would be different if it was like a gem... Or, could it be that it was actually an incredible power stone that Hanekawa and I just couldn't perceive?"

"If it was a power stone, I'd think that, with the way you are now, you'd be able to feel something—hm. Well, Araragi-kun. Tell this to Miss Class Rep. She should be able to understand everything."

said Oshino.

Oshino, who smirked on a regular basis, was, for some reason—giving me a facial expression that looked like he was in an even better mood.

He said to put off investigating 'school ghost stories' for a moment.

"How about looking into Naoetsu High's curriculum—he said. At any rate, the duty of a student is to study, I suppose."

005

The next day.

In the classroom that morning, when I repeated the words of the specialist Oshino Meme who seemed like he had seen through everything, Hanekawa, the girl full of knowledge, said in an instant,

"Aah."

As if she understood everything.

What's with these two? It's frightening.

That was what I thought, but being the commoner that I was who didn't know anything, I kept myself from saying something rude like that in order to hear the truth from Hanekawa, and instead said as normal,

"So what exactly is going on?"

and stopped there.

"Hm? Ah, no, it seems I was just being overanxious this time around—ah, I've shown my embarrassing side to both you and Oshino-san, huh. Rather than it being a swing and a miss, I guess I've just struck out entirely."

"Er, I completely do not understand, but… Your embarrassing side? Did I miss something? Like, what exactly is it?"

"This and that. This may sound like an excuse, but I have doubts of my own, you see. I was thinking that if you were going to have a religion, you should be doing it properly—and I thought that the halfheartedness of the shrine and the object of worship was related to the ominousness that Oshino-san spoke of and the bad feelings that you were getting, so I unintentionally ended up worrying. I'm glad that there was nothing in the end."

"Hanekawa. Do your best, and maybe you'll be able to explain in such a way that even I can understand."

"Telling me to do my best…"

Hanekawa gave me a wry smile.

I guess the way I made my request was a bit weird.

"As I was saying, once I cleared up all the doubtful points, I was able to come to a peaceful conclusion. Up until now, both of us thought that the stone was the center of all this, right?"

"Eh? Ah, yeah. …But, is it possible for it to not be the stone?"

"You see, it's the shrine. The shrine."

"The shrine…?"

"Right. The shrine. If you think of the center being the shrine instead of the stone, there was no need to bother Oshino-san about it."

Bothered or not, that guy did sit in that abandoned building and listened to what I had to say…

"Even if you say to think of the shrine as the center… What happens if I do? A shrine falling apart like that—"

"Mm. Basically, if I have to make it easy to understand, then probably, the stone wasn't put in the shrine to be enshrined—by putting the stone into the shrine, that stone was chosen."

"…Are those two different?"

"They're really different. In the end, the shrine is just a container, but that in itself can't be the object of a religion—at the very least, in regards to the root of the matter, the point that it's influenced by some strange religion goes away completely."

"But, even so, isn't it still the same thing? Rather, if it wasn't influenced by a religion, then isn't it that someone made up a religion instead—"

"No, you've misunderstood."

said Hanekawa.

"Because in the first place, when that shrine was made, it wasn't a shrine to begin with."

"……?"

"This has to do with Naoetsu High's curriculum—right, even if I don't investigate again, since I looked into it before taking entrance exams, it came to me pretty quickly."

So she did do something like that.

That's fear-inducing.

"See, during our first year, we had a selection of art classes to choose from, right?—though I chose painting, there were other classes besides it, like calligraphy and handicraft, right? I think that what Oshino-san wanted me to look into was the curriculum for that handicraft class."

"Handicraft…?"

"Yes. Well, it's like a woodworking class. And in that curriculum, there was something like—a free project to make your own shed."

"……"

"Since I'm not taking the class, I don't know for certain, but my point is that a shed made in that class became that shrine, is what I think."

"……"

"And, from what we can see, it was a failed project—this is just a hypothesis, but I think that this is about what happened. Some student tried to make a shed in crafting class, and failed. But even if it was a failure, it was something he made in class, so he is told to take it home. However, because he would simply throw it away after taking it home, he tried to secretly throw it away in school instead, and headed towards the trash dump site. And then, at that point, he went near the flower bed."

I see.

There was indeed a trash dump site right by the flower bed.

Something of that size couldn't be thrown away in a classroom trash can, so normally you would choose to take it directly to the dump site.

"And as he passed, he happens to see the very stone in question—in fact, he may even have nearly tripped over it like I did. Either way, seeing as he found a stone with such a convenient size, if he put that stone inside his shed, that failed work could unexpectedly become something that people would look at—"

It wasn't that the stone came to look like a statue because of the shrine.

It was that—because of the stone, that wooden structure came to look like a shrine.

The simulacrum phenomenon—though that's a bit different from this.

That failure.

That failed work stopped being a failure.

"The opposite—it inverted itself, huh."

As I muttered that, I finally came to understand.

"Yes. Of course, it hasn't changed from looking crudely made, but at the very least, it changed from something you would want to throw away into a shrine—or even an actual shed, and because of that, that student left it at that. And so, the stone looks like it's become a statue, almost making us wonder if there's some religion involved."

"What about the altar… and the candy?"

"As for the altar, there was something that looked like one, wasn't there. Maybe there was a student who left his own 'failed work' that he made in a class or a club or whatever because it looked like an altar when he put it in front of his shrine… The candy probably wasn't a failure or anything, but it's possible the person taking care of the flower bed or someone who just happened to pass by had some candy on their hands that they left there for no special reason."

"…So, instead of it being something so exaggerated like a religion, it was just that because it looked like what it did, offerings ended up being made?"

"Well, rather than those being offerings, it's more like they were just leaving some leftover candy that they had brought to school… Well, the possibility was there from the beginning, but the possibility of the stone being a religious item seemed higher to me."

I see…

Since they weren't even coins or anything, I can really get the impression that the candy was just 'left there because they had some remaining'.

"I don't know who's the one taking care of the flower bed, but if a shrine suddenly showed up, I would think they would try and get rid of it…"

"Nah. Normally, you wouldn't want to destroy something that looked like a shrine. Since you'd receive divine punishment."

"Well, that's…"

And eventually, what was there became 'the norm', huh.

Without its origins being called into question.

What was there became a normal—'blessing', even.

"....."

"Whew, I feel refreshed!"

said Hanekawa, looking pleased as she stretched her arms.

With a personality like hers, a situation where 'there was something she didn't know' could certainly become stressful, and she really did have the smile of someone who was refreshed from that.

"Is that so... Personally, I'm still not exactly satisfied, or rather the conclusion is mainly just your own thoughts and feelings—"

"No it's not. It's really because of you that I came to that conclusion."

"Eh? Because of me?"

"See, it's because you said something to Oshino-san how it 'somehow reminded you of a shrine' that Oshino-san came to understand the truth, right? No matter how good he is, without the right evidence, he wouldn't have been able to see it—for the curriculum of a school which is a 'closed space', he couldn't possibly be able to predict it. When you said that it reminded you of something because it looked like it was imitating something, wasn't that because you made something similar in a class before? Araragi-kun, the art class you took was handicraft, right?"

"...Well, yeah. I guess so."

It hadn't been at a temple or on a road.

Where I had seen it was at the handicraft workshop.

When Oshino had asked me to draw him a picture, he had simply just wanted to look at the shape of the shrine—but when he heard me say that I had 'remembered while I was drawing', he was able to guess the truth.

And that should've been it.

"Well, I guess that's case closed, then—er, Araragi-kun! Where are you going? Class is about to start, you know? Ah, wait, don't run in the hallways—"

006

And now for the epilogue, or rather, the punch line.

Ignoring Hanekawa, I ran through the hallways, exited the building, headed towards the courtyard, and arrived at the flower bed. And there, I lifted up the shrine that had enshrined the statue-like stone and destroyed it by hurling it to the ground.

"Hah, hah, hah, hah—"

No.

It was pointless to do so after already having destroyed it, but—even so, I couldn't calm down and continued to disassemble it until it had become a mere pile of scrap wood.

Even if I didn't do that, it was already a piece of scrap wood if the stone inside was removed—but anyway, I took the scrap wood over to the trash dump site.

It was.

It was a transportation that had, as a result, taken over two years.

"....."

Yes.

Needless to say, this shrine was what I had, two years ago, constructed in a woodworking class and left in a flower bed instead of taking it home, generally along the lines of what Hanekawa had said.

It wasn't that I remembered it because I had made something similar to it in class—it was because I had made that very thing in class.

I had completely forgotten.

I did say that I was different from Hanekawa in that I couldn't remember things from two years ago, but this was too much. I had called it crude, the work of a child, worn-out, and other completely terrible things, and who would've thought that it was my very own shed.

I understood why Oshino had made such an unpleasant smile.

He was definitely trying to hold back from laughing hard—Hanekawa had said that she had shown her embarrassing side, but that was nothing compared to how I was right now.

It seemed I hadn't been found out by Hanekawa, who probably assumed that a person could completely forget something that had happened two years ago... I was so embarrassed I probably wouldn't be able to look her in the eyes again.

Nevertheless, with class being about to start and my attendance being at a dangerous level, and with me being made to be rehabilitated by Hanekawa, I couldn't not return to the classroom.

The stone entered my field of vision as I trudged away from the dump site. Yup, now I could only see it as just a normal stone.

It didn't move.

It's just a boring old rock.

For the time being, the candy offerings were still there, but by itself it wasn't effective in making the stone look like a statue or even an object of worship—if I cleaned those up as well, candy will probably not be left there a second time.

But as I thought that, I felt a bit guilty for my act of destroying the shrine as a result of my embarrassment. Well, as the creator, I'd be the one to know that I absolutely would not be receiving divine punishment...

However, I still felt a little sorry for the poor stone who had been made into a god and then turned back into a common rock as a result of my reluctance to take a failure back home and, later, my embarrassment.

It would be weird to apologize to a stone… But even as I thought that, I entered the flower bed and picked up the stone.

If it's worshiped because it's an oddity, or if it became an oddity because it was worshiped—that's what Oshino had said.

Indeed.

In terms of the candy, it was true that the act of offering it to the stone had been 'performed'—it's possible that my thoughtless action had turned this stone into an oddity, and as I thought that, my apologetic feelings became even more prominent.

From just a stone that had been part of the norm.

To a blessing of a stone statue.

And then possibly to an unthinkable oddity—and now it's no longer connected to its origins.

The day that unthinkable thing became the norm.

It's possible that day had already arrived.

And as I thought that, I also thought—that the way I aimlessely attended school was a problem. I earnestly thought it.

When I returned to the classroom, the teacher still hadn't arrived yet, so I tried asking Hanekawa about it. Whether I was just a wooden, stony, apathetic person with no appreciation for my every day life.

But a stone can become a stone statue.

And if wood can become a shrine, then being wooden and stony might not be so bad.

"…Hm? Eh, this stone."

She said.

Then, I realized.

I realized it after picking it up with my hands, but it was something that I had not realized two years ago. Yes, this sensation, this feeling, it was unmistakable.

"It's just concrete!"



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

5
May

Koyomi Flower

001

In early May, when Senjougahara Hitagi and I had encountered each other by chance, Golden Week had basically just ended, and, though I wasn't really trying to complain, my mind and body were completely exhausted. Well, more than just exhausted—I could say that my mind and body had just been severely tormented—but either way, it was tough.

It was tough to a deathly extent, I could even say—so tough that I could no longer believe in what was normal.

Hell is just one ship plank beneath—that's the saying that the fishermen that go out on the ocean have been heard using, but it seems to apply on land as well.

Hell is just one layer of earth beneath.

Just how unreliable, just how fragile, just how easily broken the ground that I always walk on top of was—I was able to realize it thoroughly.

I felt it alongside my pain.

Even the street along which I naturally went to and from school could just as naturally collapse at any time—I realized that we had built our lives on top of such a dangerous balance.

Realized?

No.

I didn't know anything—and this wasn't just the excuse of Hanekawa Tsubasa, the girl who possesses fantastic wings, but to say that I knew was, at best, using and speaking with only what I knew, the foolishness of a guy like me

But Senjougahara Hitagi.

As for that classmate who could be called a sheltered lady, before I even experienced and realized the fragility of normality, she had already discovered it.

You could even say that she had no choice but to understand whether she wanted to or not—from what I heard of her and the half of her life that was a frayed tightrope, it was something to fear.

"There's a wall between the normal and the abnormal—that way of thinking was wrong from the beginning. Of course, you have to differentiate between the normal and the abnormal, and you won't be able to live if you don't, but this and that are like bordering countries—over here and over there are connected."

She had unconcernedly, simply, and quietly said that, with a tone of voice that betrayed no emotion.

"There's no such thing as up and down—there's no such thing as falling from normal into the abnormal, and there's no such thing as climbing back out of the abnormal back into the normal. Just by walking, you might suddenly find yourself in a different place, or a place you don't know. It's like that—"

So it's like being on the wrong path, is what it is.

Like if you were walking on the sidewalk and you suddenly found yourself on the road without realizing it—well, it was a simile I could understand, in any case.

Yes.

Without a guard rail or a crosswalk, there isn't much difference in the roads and the sidewalks.

"That's true. And then you'll unexpectedly find yourself in a traffic accident—though, between cars and pedestrians, I don't know which of them are normal and which are abnormal. And then, Araragi-kun, there are things like the bicycle you ride to and from school everyday as well—"

Strictly speaking, riding your bicycle on the sidewalks is a violation of traffic laws, but from the bicycle's standpoint, it could be troublesome to put bikes on the road, and perhaps atypical of modern society.

"Right. Basically, even if the ground on which you walked didn't crumble, even if you intended to walk straight ahead, you could still get into an 'accident'—but you aren't losing your footing, and you aren't dropping from the normal into the abnormal. But you know, Araragi-kun."

But Senjougahara also said this.

Without putting much emotion into it.

"You can still fall from the normal into the normal. And if you climb up from the abnormal, there may still be the abnormal to meet you there."

002

"Oh my. I thought I was feeling a bit nauseous since a little while ago, but I've just realized, it's because Araragi-kun was walking next to me."

"Eh!? What, are you trying to attack me by saying that to yourself, even though you already knew I was here!?"

May ninth.

It was a Tuesday evening—I, alongside Senjougahara, was on the way home from the cram school. Well, rather than on the way home, I had intended to, being the gentleman that I was, escort the young lady Senjougahara all the way to her home, but her attitude seemed severely bitter and terrifyingly sharp.

"Oh? Araragi-kun, why are you listening in on someone talking to herself for your own benefit? Were you not raised properly?”

"I just happened to overhear it—that is, you insulting me!"

"Hm. I was trying to compliment you, though."

"Don’t become some cynical character! How could you possibly spin 'being with this guy makes me nauseous' into a positive way and make it into a compliment?”

"Well, if I say nausea, perhaps it could be morning sickness, right?"

"Are you saying that being with me made you feel pregnant!?"

No.

That still isn’t a compliment, is it.

"Those words were just meant to campaign to the world about Araragi- kun’s manliness, you see.”

"That’s an incredibly negative campaign. A promotion like that will just give me minus points.”

"But you know, Araragi-kun, you talking to yourself since a little while ago has gotten rather annoying.”

"Eh? Huh, that’s strange, I was trying to hold a conversation with you, though…”

It felt like I was being insulted at a rate of once every five seconds.

What exactly was I supposed to say?

Was she a young lady or a sharp knife?

"....."

Well.

Even so, if I try to interpret this in a gentlemanly way, then Senjougahara Hitagi—it wasn’t that I didn’t understand this behavior of this classmate of mine. Well, honestly, even without having to be a gentleman, I could still understand.

At any rate, this girl had been suffering a lot of pain—she had suffered to the point that she could hardly feel pain anymore.

As if having been poisoned to a point beyond just paralysis, she had suffered that much.

An illness.

That she suffered.

She had lived her life fighting against this illness—and then yesterday, by chance, she had come in contact with me, and the time of fighting that illness came to an end.

Although, to say that she had come in contact with me sounds a bit patronizing. Even if she hadn't run into me, it's possible that she could have eventually healed herself with her own power—but regardless.

Her illness, which had concerned an oddity, came to a resolution with Oshino's help—this had been just last night, and today, for the sake of cleaning up afterwards, or dealing with the aftermath, or in any case settling the discrepancy that occurred, we had visited Oshino once more.

That was the road on which we were returning home.

Looking at it from Senjougahara's perspective, we were still right on the heels of yesterday—her sharp personality made for combating that illness wouldn't suddenly return back to what it used to be in one day. But as a friend, I prayed that someday her thorns would become less sharp.

"But you know… Comparing this with being ill, I can understand the value of good health, but as someone who had been ill for such a long period of time, 'just walking' like this feels like something new to me."

"Hmm. Is that so?"

"Almost like I'm walking in another world."

"Another world, huh…

I thought it was exaggerated to say that even walking was new for her, but after having had to lie for so long, she was probably speaking her mind right now, without having to lie anymore.

Incidentally, though we had gone to the cram school on my bike yesterday, today we had made the trip on foot. Because of the circumstances—or rather, because of the discrepancy that had occurred as a result of yesterday's conclusion, the bike couldn't be used.

Well, fortunately, the discrepancy was also settled without problems, and now that I could ride my favorite mountain bike around starting tomorrow, I almost wanted to skip all the way back home.

However, if I did that, who knew how much I'd be ridiculed by Senjougahara walking next to me, so I just walked normally.

"By the way, Araragi-kun. Since you've miraculously ended up walking next to a girl, please go and walk on the side of the road. You're just tactless scum, aren't you."

"....."

Well, I was ridiculed enough, even without skipping.

Well, even so, it was a bit thoughtless of me like she said, so I moved to be on Senjougahara's left side.

What, so Senjougahara was trying to make me into a proper gentleman, was what I thought, and felt I could be at ease from her attacks.

"Hold on, could you not stand on my left side? You're aiming for my heart, aren't you? I can see right through you."

"....."

She had just been setting it up to attack me further.

It was what I had feared.

Though I thought that I was praying for her thorns to round out as a friend, regardless of the praying itself, I began to suspect whether I could do anything for her as a friend.

"...If you feel that energetic, then I guess you'll be all right even if I don't take you all the way home. Then, just around here..."

"What are you saying? If you're going to take me then take me all the way home properly. What am I going to do if rumors spread that Senjougahara Hitagi was only escorted by a boy halfway to her house? My reputation as a sheltered lady would be utterly ruined."

"You're only worried for yourself..."

"And if you leave me here, I'll spread my own rumors that Araragi-kun tried to take my life."

"Do you not care about others' reputations?"

And besides, who would believe a rumor like that?

It's not like I'm famous for being an assassin.

"Not to mention, you don't have anyone you could spread rumors with, right?"

"I'll just keep whispering to myself in the classroom or whereever, so it's fine."

"No girl would be fine with that!"

I shrugged my shoulders. If I just needed to take her home, then I would.

Though I had started off with the intention of doing her a service, at some point it turned into a responsibility—though I was fine with it, since I had some free time either way.

Since I had nothing to do.

But it would be unbearable if I said something tactless and was 'forbidden to speak' like I was yesterday—I had already returned the mountain of stationery that I had confiscated.

"Well then… What should I do about this, now?"

"Hm? About what?"

"Ah. Please wait for a bit. Right now, I'll think of a way to say it so that even Araragi-kun can understand."

"Before that, think of a way to say it so that it's not unpleasant for Araragi-kun!"

"See, because of this case, I was charged a fee from Oshino-san, right?"

"Ah. Yeah."

It was a hundred thousand yen.

In comparison to the five million yen debt I owed to Oshino, I could say that it didn't amount to much, but even so, for a high school girl it was a rather large sum.

What I found unpleasant about it, though, was that a hundred thousand yen was, even when considering Senjougahara's family situation, an amount of money that made you think that it was barely within their reach, or that 'it would work one way or another'.

"Do you have any savings or anything?"

"I do not. I do have debts, though."

"Eh? If it's your parents', then okay… but you have debts in your own name? To someone other than Oshino?"

"Yes. My team ended the pennant race with four more losses than wins. That is, a debt of four matches."

"Are you the owner of a pro baseball team!?"

That would make you a multimillionare!

Just pay a hundred thousand up front!

Pay with your credit card!

But, even without debts to others, she was probably telling the truth when she said she didn't have any savings—if that was the case, then Senjougahara would have to start earning a hundred thousand yen from this point on.

"Just like Oshino said, I'll have to work part-time in fast food or something, huh."

"Well, it’s the same for my debt too, but it’s not so urgent that we have to pay whatever we get, so I don’t think there’s any hurry to raise money.”

"Unlike Araragi-kun, I like to be neat about my money."

"Don’t just assume that I’m careless with money!"

"If I’m going to shirk on my payment then I’d like to shirk it properly, and if I’m going to pay it then I’d like to pay it properly.”

"……"

Is there even a procedure that lets you properly shirk a payment?

And anyway, I couldn’t really imagine Senjougahara working in fast food in the first place…

"Hello, welcome! Would you like this to go?"

"Give the customer the choice to eat inside the restaurant! Don’t just force them to go home!”

"How would you like some fried ‘taters?"

"What’s with the sudden accent!"

"How would you like some… tubers?"

"That makes it sound like I’ll be served raw potatoes…"

"Hm. As I thought, fast food isn’t suited for me—for a fart-time job."

"A ‘fart-time’ job is beyond unsuitable!"

And there, I said something that came to mind.

What came to mind was what I spoke about with Hanekawa last month— Oshino’s ‘job’ was to collect oddity stories, sell them to someone, and earn money from it—

"Senjougahara. Do you happen to know any oddities?"

"If I can call walking together with Araragi-kun an oddity, then yes, I do know of one.”

"That’s not an oddity."

"In that case, no."

She sure is boisterous.

There are words that can trample upon the kindness of a person, but it’s rare for a person to experience being trampled upon even when he’s not trying to be kind.

But I said this to her.

"No, because Oshino, as a specialist, is a collector of oddity stories, you see—so if you happen to know of, say, a weird oddity story, or a rare urban legend or something, then it's possible he might lower your debt, was what I was thinking."

"Hmm… So you're saying it'll be an exchange of services. You've given me some good information, Araragi-kun. I'll praise you for that."

"……"

Will she ever say thank you like a normal person?

Out of all the words of gratitude I've heard in my life, this has made me the least happy, so I'll praise her for that.

"But unfortunately, I don't happen to know any stories about oddities above the one I experienced personally."

"I don't really think there's an 'above' or a 'below' for oddities, though."

"Oh, those are words that come from an upper level, aren't they. Indeed, how different are the words of the great Araragi-kun that associated with the great king of oddities. They're completely different."

"What's with the 'great' Araragi-kun?"

"Yes, when seen from the height that the Great Araragi-kun stands upon, all oddities—all bizarre phenomena—can be seen as equal, and for a person such as myself born humbly in a lower class, the difference is much too large, O Great Araragi-kun."

"'O Great'?"

What the heck, this girl, she's acting so self-important while saying such servile lines…

"There are people that say the Great Bach and the Lesser Bach, so you can add things like 'Lesser' to people's names… Although as for me, it's not a naming sense that I can easily imitate."

"Well, it's fine to add 'Great' to a person's name, but adding 'Lesser' seems a bit cruel, right?"

"So, Extremely Miniscule Araragi-kun."

"If we were just talking about names then whatever, but if you're talking about my height, then I very strongly object to that!"

"Then, would you like it if I called you the Magnificent Araragi-kun? O Magnificent Araragi-kun."

"……"

Servility kind of suited her…

This was kind of a problem.

"Anyway, I don't know any kind of oddity story. I was never good with scary stories and things like that in the first place. I'm worse with those things than manual labor, so I guess I don't have much choice but to get a part-time job."

"Hmm… Well, it's fine if you're doing what you want to do."

Though no matter how I looked at it, you looked like the type of person who excelled in scary stories… Or rather, to be honest, my first encounter with this girl makes for a pretty good 'scary story' in itself.

The Insane Stapler Girl.

I wonder if Oshino would buy that off of me.

For five million yen.

"You're thinking something very rude about me, aren't you, Araragi- kun?"

"Why are you attacking me so pointlessly…"

She won't let me grumble about her in my own mind, will she.

That's being way too strict about criticism about yourself.

"I'll make this very clear for you, Araragi-kun. In a two hundred meter radius around me, I won't allow any freedom within your own mind."

"That's political pressure, isn't it?"

"I'll guarantee that you have no freedom of expression, no freedom of religion, and no freedom of thought."

"That's just tyranny!"

Not to mention your area of influence is huge!

What kind of a person are you?

"They call me the Red Queen, you see."

Is this supposed to be 'Through the Looking-Glass'?"

"And other times, they call me a red stranger—a complete stranger, you see."

"Then aren't you just a normal hated person?"

"And there are people that call me a red lie. The speaker of red lies— The Red Fake— they call me."

"What kind of a name is that? It sounds cool, but that makes it sound like you're really hated!"

"...Huh? Am I not actually really hated? Oh dear, I wonder if my life will be fine from here on out..."

As if she suddenly became uneasy, Senjougahara stopped walking and began thinking about something seriously.

Her emotions sure are unstable...

I really had wanted to leave her along the way earlier, but now, I don't think it would be a good idea to leave someone like her alone on any road in the whole world. It really was my duty as a friend to make sure she made it all the way home. No, even if I wasn't a friend, it would still be my duty as an upstanding citizen...

"This won't do. I'll have to gain the favor of the world somehow. I'll have to decline being the second-most hated person after Araragi-kun."

"...You... Is this really your idea of friendship? Do you really have any intention of becoming my friend?"

"Of course I do. I have every intention of becoming Araragi-kun's frenemy."

"Frenemy is made from the words friend and enemy, isn't it!?"

"Yes. Basically, you would be both a companion and an adversary..."

"A person who's both a companion and an adversary would be just a normal enemy, wouldn't they!"

Don't make it sound like it's a rivalry.

There isn't anything we're competing for, anyway.

"Incidentally, I absolutely hate the kind of people who say 'I don't have any friends at all~' while actually having people they can call friends."

"....."

She's narrow-minded...

Too narrow-minded.

"I'd like to teach them what it's really like to not have any friends."

"Fine. Forgive me, okay? Since you have me, now, after all."

"Hm."

Senjougahara looked at me.

She looked with some intense eyes.

They were eyes that made me think I was being swallowed up by them— what, considering her personality, did she hate people that acted friendly too?

Mm.

I guess I just can't act the same as I do with Hanekawa…

"Ha. Well, I suppose so."

After a while, Senjougahara said that—without bringing out a stapler, without bringing out a box cutter, she said that.

I don't think I've ever felt so relieved.

"Since I'm feeling generous, I guess I'll forgive you for that, okapi."

"Okapi?"

"I thought if I ended my sentences with an animal, it would sound cuter."

"I really just can't get your personality…"

It was full of mysteries.

Too much of a mystery.

Or, could it possibly be her way of hiding her embarrassment?—if that's the case, then it does make her a bit cuter.

"Oddities, huh—I wonder what would be good."

Even while deciding on the plan to work part-time, Senjougahara continued to consider the idea I had brought forth—a considerate gesture of hers.

Or perhaps, even that was just hiding her embarrassment, too.

"There's always the option of making up a fake ghost story as well, I suppose."

"There is!?"

She isn't cute at all.

How is this girl so calmly scheming to feed fake information to my benefactor, not to mention her own benefactor?

"Ah, well… If I were to earn money with a fake story, then I'd just become the same as that lowlife."

"Huh? That lowlife? Who?"

"Eh? Ah… Whenever I talk about a lowlife, I'll always be referring to you, Araragi-kun."

"Hey!"

Senjougahara, who had stopped walking, suddenly moved again—and not forward, but to the side. That is, from the sidewalk onto the road, almost as if she was about to jump out.

I absolutely could not comprehend why she would suddenly take such an action, but, though we hadn't known each other for very long, I had somewhat gotten used to her erratic behavior, and reflexively made to stop Senjougahara.

By grabbing onto her shoulders.

Even though she was a girl, because I was trying to stop the movement of an entire person's body weight, it came pretty heavily—unlike yesterday.

It was completely different from when I caught Senjougahara yesterday on the stairs—

"What is it?"

"Eh?"

"Don't just touch me so casually."

"Ah, sorry."

I let go of Senjougahara's shoulders.

"It's just that, you suddenly seemed like you were about to jump out onto the road…"

"What? Did you think I was going to commit suicide? Impulsively?"

"Er, no, what I meant was…"

It would be bad if I said it, but there were dangers like this, too, for her.

Even if her time of fighting her illness was over, it might not be completely over yet in her mind—even after taking away the regular examinations she would have to take at the hospital.

"I'm fine. Unlike Araragi-kun, who attempts suicide three times a day after meals, I don't do anything like commit suicide."

"I don't commit suicide as if I was taking medicine!"

"Eh? Then why are you called 'Suicide-kun' by every girl in our class?"

"Eh? Am I actually called that by every girl in our class…?"

Did I actually seem that suicidal?

I was pretty sure it was a lie, but I was just a little bit concerned, so I'll check with Hanekawa just to make sure… Though if I asked something like 'What do all the girls in our class call me?' then Hanekawa might be really surprised…

"Well, this 'Suicide-kun' would like to ask, but why did you suddenly seem like you were about to jump out onto the road?"

"I wasn't trying to jump out, I just thought I'd try to get a closer look at that."

"That?"

I looked over to where Senjougahara pointed. Over at the sidewalk on the other side of the road—at a telephone pole. No, to be accurate it wasn't at the telephone pole, but at around the base of it.

A bouquet had been left there.

A brand new bouquet.

Was it like an offering or a donation, that—?

"At an angle it was in the pole's shadow, so I couldn't see what it was—so I thought I would look from a different angle. It seems a traffic accident occurred around here."

"Looks like it… I wonder if it was recent?"

The route that connected the cram school and Senjougahara's home was different from the route I usually used, so since it was outside of my territory, if a traffic accident or some other accident occurred here, I would have no way of knowing it…

"But, if you got into an accident because of those flowers that caught your attention, then the person those flowers are meant for wouldn't be able to rest in their grave. Be careful."

Though it was sad to say, I've heard it was possible for those secondary incidents to occur—drivers who get distracted by signs that say 'Frequent accidents ahead' and get into an accident, or something.

"I had already made sure that there weren't any cars coming. I don't need any worrying from a lowlife."

"I'm worried about you calling your friend a lowlife!"

Besides, that sounded like a lie.

Really, the way her attention was caught by the flowers—considering the yesterday's incident where she slipped and fell off the stairs, she might actually be a rather careless person.

Being high-strung and careless sounded like the worst.

Though she had finally been cured of her 'illness', it seemed like she would die if you left her alone, this girl—was she an endangered species? Instead of taking her to her house, it seemed like I would have to make sure she made it inside her house.

Hmm, I had become friends with someone who was going to be a real handful…

"I've remembered."

"Hm?"

Because Senjougahara said that so suddenly, I tilted my head.

"What do you mean when you say you've remembered? My prestige? Or do you mean your words of apology that I deserve?"

"I can't remember things that don't exist."

"Really now."

"What I remembered was a 'scary story'—Araragi-kun."

"What?"

"This is an order from your princess. Do as you see fit."

"....."

What kind of princess has that tone of voice?

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In accordance with Princess Senjougahara's orders, on the following May tenth, early in the morning, I went to the rooftop of one of Naoetsu High's buildings.

Alone, that is.

Because it was her story, the plan was for Senjougahara to also come, but unfortunately, it was this very day that she had to go to the hospital.

So as her 'friend', I went in her place—although, rather than as her friend, it felt like I was just being used as she wished, but either way, I had no reason to turn down a request.

Besides, I had nothing better to do.

"Do it for me, okay? If this ends well, then I'll show you my breasts again."

"There's no need for that!"

Don't say 'again', either.

Some time during those types of exchanges, I ended up agreeing, and went to the rooftop following what Senjougahara had told me.

"The rooftop of a building? Which one?"

"Any of them is fine. Because all of them are 'like that'."

Since Senjougahara had said something like that, I first went up to the rooftop of the building I had class in—although, if I said it like that, it might make it sound like there was a proper order I followed.

But Naoetsu High's rooftops were restricted, and average students were prohibited from entering. The door to the rooftop was locked, so, far from an average student, a below-average student like me would normally have no chance of entering.

Then, if you wanted to know how I trespassed onto the rooftop, then what I did was—I climbed up the outer walls of the buildings from a window on the top floor.

If my hands had slipped even a little bit it would have meant instant death.

As for why I would go to such an extent for the sake of a girl I had met just two days ago, even I couldn't really understand, but it's possible that I had actually just been hungry to fulfill a 'request from a friend'.

Hmm.

I did say that I withdrew my doctrine that said that making friends lowers your strength as a human, and looking at a situation like this makes me think that doing so wasn't a mistake…

But, when I explained this to Senjougahara for the sake of her honor, she hadn't expected that I would go that far.

Or rather, what she said was actually,

"You should have just asked Hanekawa-san for help. If Hanekawa-san had went to a teacher and made up a reason, then the teacher would probably have been happy to loan you a key."

Well, if an honors student like Hanekawa had asked, most teachers would have probably allowed it no matter how absurd the reason was—but the reason I didn't do that was because of my consideration for Hanekawa. With Golden Week happening and all, I would feel awkward having to rely on her.

Well, even if it was a dangerous act, and though it wasn't something I would do voluntarily, climbing up the wall was hardly a risk compared to the nightmare of Golden Week, or to the hell that was spring break.

Then.

"Ah… It's true. It's just as Senjougahara said."

After climbing over the fence and placing my feet on the roof's tiles, I found that Senjougahara's words had not been false—if you asked if I had thought her words were false, then, well, I did think that they could have been false.

Well, sorry about that, but I couldn't so easily swallow the words of someone like her, who told lies as if she was breathing.

I had to keep an eye out.

And I had been trying to keep an eye out; I had gotten excited and carelessly put it off, but if I wanted to explain what exactly was on the rooftop as Senjougahara had said—there was a chance she was lying, so I was leaving out that description up until now—that was, a bouquet.

A bouquet of flowers.

Near the fence on the rooftop, a bouquet of flowers wrapped in a vinyl sheet had been placed—and perhaps instead of placed, it had been offered.

At any rate.

A brand new bouquet of flowers was on the rooftop that was supposed to be prohibited from entry.

"....."

It seems that yesterday, Senjougahara saw the new bouquet near the telephone pole and remembered this bouquet on the rooftop—looking at it from another perspective, to her this was such a trifling matter that she basically forgot about it.

It was so trifling that she could quickly forget it and just as suddenly remember it.

However.

Though it did seem trifling—it seems she did find it a little strange.

"Er, Senjougahara—Why did you go to the rooftop anyway?"

The night before.

At that point, I had still had my misgivings about what Senjougahara had said, so I thought I would try to get some substantiation to her claims, and asked that question.

"How did you get onto the rooftop anyway, when entry is supposed to be prohibited?"

"I may not be as good as Hanekawa-nee-san, but I happen to be an honors student as well. I'm capable of borrowing the key by going to the teacher with an excuse."

"Well, even if that's the case, don't refer to Hanekawa as something like Hanekawa-nee-san."

"Oh my. Are you saying that only you can refer to Hanekawa as your sister?"

"I've never called her that!"

It seemed that Senjougahara was, for some reason, suspecting that I held some unrequited feelings for Hanekawa or something. Though I don't know what basis she had for that...

"Well, anyway, that's fine for now. I'll leave it aside for now. So when and why did you go up onto the rooftop? If you had to make an excuse, that sounds like you weren't telling the teacher the truth…"

"Wow, so lame! Only people with actual deductive reasoning skills appeal to me."

"……"

Apparently I didn't have the right to read into Senjougahara's words. Since every remark I made was met with criticism, at the rate it was going the flashback would never end, so if I just leave out most of that and just think about what Senjougahara had said—

"At any rate, when I entered Naoetsu High, I had to take care of my physical fitness. For the sake of my fitness, I took the fitting actions."

Is what she said.

Ignoring the fact that she said that in an especially pun-filled way, it was true that her wariness towards other people was strong enough to the point that she wrote a fake address into her class's mailing list.

In a different way from how Hanekawa looked into Naoetsu High when she took the exams (or perhaps after she entered), Senjougahara must have thoroughly investigated to see what was dangerous and what was safe, who was a friend and who was an enemy.

And, not just after entering high school, but for the past two years, she could have been continuously carrying on with follow-up investigations as well—though, if she had been doing so, then she would've known about the other day when I destroyed the shrine in the courtyard, but perhaps she must have just decided that that was 'safe' and ignored it.

And, in the midst of all those things that she had ignored in the same way, the bouquet of flowers on the restricted-access rooftop was one of them—that was the case.

"It's different from oddity stories or even ghost stories—but, if you think about it, it's still a mysterious story, isn't it?"

Yes.

It was a mysterious story indeed.

Because—Hanekawa had said this earlier.

In the eighteen years of history that Naoetsu High held, there wasn't even one incident in which a student had died—so that's why.

This.

Why these flowers had been offered as if someone had jumped off the roof—it was a mystery.

It’s completely different from students passing by and leaving sweets at a flimsy shrine. This seemed like a proper flower offering—

Putting my hands on the ladder of the water tower built on the rooftop, I climbed to an even higher position and looked around to confirm the rooftops of the other buildings—those were also as Senjoughara had said.

A bouquet had been left on each and every rooftop. I wasn’t completely certain because they were all far away, but from what I could see, they were all the same type of flower.

"……"

To think that Hanekawa.

Even though she had looked into the school in order to offer “school ghost stories” to show her gratitude to Oshino, to think that she hadn’t known about this—although, in her case, it’s possible she only looked in places she could lawfully access, unlike Senjougahara.

I guess she really doesn’t know everything, that girl… In this case, it’s stranger for Senjoughara to know, or perhaps even scarier…

"Though it’s not like anyone jumped to their death, the fact that someone has been continuously leaving flowers on all of the rooftops without letting anyone know—would a story like this be something that Oshino might want?

Said Senjougahara in the usual expressionless way.

As well as in the usual flat tone of voice.

"To be specific, it could be worth about one hundred twenty thousand yen, could it not?”

"……"

She was aiming to get twenty thousand yen for a kickback.

She sure has a unique personality, that girl…

I thought she was uncooperative due to her illness and the oddity, or rather she definitely became uncooperative because of that, but it’s quite possible that her personality was plenty strange even before all that.

It was only an act that led to her being called a secluded woman, but I wonder what she would have been called if she hadn’t put up that act…

Well, in any case.

In this way, I was able to gain proof of Senjougahara’s story—so now, what I had to do was bring that story as it was to Oshino.

And though I behaved as if I was completely indifferent and uninterested in this case, I was actually rather curious as to how Oshino would explain this.

Flowers left for a suicide that never happened.

A bouquet of flowers.

Did they have some firm goal or intention in mind, or—

"...Well, anyway."

I muttered.

On top of the water tower.

"How am I going to get back inside the building..."

004

"It's easy to climb up but it's difficult to get back down—haha. It's almost like life, isn't it? So, Araragi-kun, how were you able to get down, then?"

Oshino, who seemed to like hearing stories of my failures regardless of whether collecting stories of oddities was a hobby or a job, asked me looking incredibly happy.

I had promptly gone to the abandoned building of the cram school ruins later that day—though I never thought that I would first be asked about my own carelessness.

In the corner of the classroom, a young blonde girl looked at me with a stern expression—it seems that for her, she finds neither stories of oddities nor stories of my failures to be all that interesting.

Well, no matter what kind of story it may be, she probably doesn't see anything related to me as anything pleasant.

"No, well, I just got down normally. I just did my best and managed to get down. I just climbed over the fence, and climbed down the wall to get back through the window I had opened earlier."

"Haha. Then you did work hard, didn't you, Araragi-kun? Don't you miss having the power of a vampire? If you had that, you should've at least been fine with jumping off from the rooftop."

"Well, I probably would have been fine... But I don't think I miss it. Even this pseudo-vampire power is hard enough for me."

"Hm. Speaking of pseudo-powers."

He gestured towards the girl in the corner.

"Make sure you let Shinobu-chan drink your blood sometime this weekend. Since she'll go and die if you don't."

"...Got it."

Ah.

That's right, Oshino had given a name to that blonde girl, hadn't he— Oshino Shinobu. Honestly, I'm still not used to it at all—but since I couldn't call her by her real name either, I guess I have to force myself to adapt to it.

"Shinobu can drink my blood, then."

Even so, ever since Golden Week it feels like I've been coming to these cram school ruins too frequently—why on Earth did I have to spend my precious youth that occurs only once in a lifetime in an abandoned building with a gaudy old man?

Ah, and since Oshino has been spending his time in this abandoned building, rather than gaudy, he's become a bit of a sloppy old man as well...

"....."

Nevertheless.

I couldn't exactly think of my high school years as my precious youth occurring only once in a lifetime—though youth did occur only once in a lifetime, I couldn't really call it precious.

Because it was merely nothing.

There was no substance—it was rather something that could simply vanish away with the blink of an eye.

No point in calling it youth.

After spring passes, it's only summer, after all.

"So, what about it? Oshino. The story I brought just now, is that worth a hundred twenty thousand yen—or, no, around a hundred thousand yen?"

"Mm..."

"What is it?"

Since Oshino went silent in the usual way that made one think, I had no choice but to press him.

"No, it doesn't have to amount to all of it, you know? If it's not a hundred thousand, at least eighty thousand, or fifty thousand—"

"....."

"Or even twenty thousand—"

Ah.

This is pointless, isn't it, I thought as I said all that.

Oshino wasn't easy to understand to the point that I could read his expressions, but I had some intuition, at the very least—if I had to say it, there was no pulse at all.

He had at least shown some interest in the earlier story about the shrine that Hanekawa had offered—if Hanekawa had demanded money, Oshino would definitely have paid—but this time, it seems that the condition is different.

"Araragi-kun, do you happen to know that lady's phone number, or her email address?"

"No, I don't..."

I ended up answering honestly when that sudden question was asked.

"You should've gotten it the day before yesterday, then. In that case, does that mean you have no way to contact her right now, right?"

"Well... I was planning on getting her to tell it to me soon..."

If I say it like that, then he can't speak as if he's making fun of me, right?

Since I'm not used to exchanging phone numbers yet.

"What do you mean by contact, anyway?"

"I wanted to tell her this. 'It didn't meet my expectations, so please take out a loan for the fee.'"

"....."

Well, I had already prepared my mind for that, so I wasn't too surprised.

Besides, there wasn't really a need to contact her for that—Senjoughara had planned on working part-time to properly pay back the hundred thousand yen from the start, anyway.

This was at the very least a mere side plan...

So, if somehow this worked out well, then I could report back to her before the day ended. That is, if there was no report, she wouldn't think anything of it, and begin to look for a part-time job as she had intended.

...However, I hadn't realized until Oshino had pointed it out, but if for argument's sake that Senjoughara's story did have some value, because I didn't have her number, I would have to visit her apartment once again...

What a jumbled up story.

Present-day high schoolers aren't this hard-working—and no, I have no intention of saying that I'm one of those high schoolers.

"Is that so. Well, then, the next time you see her at school, please pass on the message for me."

"Ah... Well, since she went to the hospital for a bit, she might not come to school tomorrow... But, if I report to her like this, no matter what I do, without any reasons I'll probably be killed. Could I at least get you to tell me why this story isn't even worth a single yen?"

"It's a bit much to say that it's not worth even a single yen. It's just that, if I don't round up the small change, then the accounting gets too complicated without a calculator."

"Small change..."

How small is small change, anyway?

I personally would say that it's a bit difficult to call a 500-yen coin 'small change', but if you do include that, then rounding up that kind of small change is, rather than just ordinary worthlessness, it feels kind of bitter.

There's just no consideration... Really, he's the kind of person to say stuff like that, isn't he... I was really glad that Senjoughara wasn't here with me.

A battle-like development, like spring break and Golden Week, could very well happen.

If I could at least avoid that...

"Haha. What is it, Araragi-kun, you sure are energetic. Did something good happen?"

"No, in my case, I'm just trying to make preparations so that something bad doesn't happen to me later..."

Thinking about the fear I had for what was in store for me, even the reaction to Oshino's usual words came late. He, who laughed at the story of my failure and would surely laugh at my unease towards the future, said in that rascally way,

"Is that so? So that's how it is."

He said.

"I had planned on charging a consulation fee in the future, but it's not like we're complete strangers, so only for this time, I'll tell you for free."

"...Thanks."

I thought he would have some ulterior motives like forcing me to help out with his story collection which made me feel like I would rather just pay money, but if he was doing it for free, then I guess that would be the better option.

But Oshino said to me,

"I'm not doing it to help you. Because people will help themselves on their own, right—"

He said.

"First of all, in terms of that traffic accident location that you guys saw—last month, an accident did happen. A pedestrian walking across the street was run over by a truck."

"Eh… Is that so. So you knew about it."

"It's close to these ruins, after all, and even without you helping me, I'm looking here and there for the sake of collecting oddity stories—so of course I know."

"Is that so…"

Although if you say 'even without me helping you', that gives me a huge feeling of alienation… Well, I guess it's not wrong in actuality. Not to mention Oshino does have that way of speaking that tends to bluntly thrust people away.

But from what I could understand, to pass away after getting caught in a traffic accident is a sad end—although, as I didn't know who they were or where they lived, there was a limit to my sadness.

Though I probably couldn't match up to the person, most likely a family member, who placed a bouquet of flowers as an offering, I still decided to pray for the victim's happiness in the next world.

"Well, investigating traffic accidents isn't really in my line of work, so I didn't really look into it too much… But, it seems that that place has a road structure in which accidents occur rather easily. This time around, it occurred because the pedestrian tried to cross in an absurd way…"

Oshino continued his explanation.

Does he not mourn the deaths of others? was what I thought, but, well, from the point of view of humanity, I might seem like a hypocrite in that case.

"Even without that, there's been lots of repeated occurrences of single-vehicle collisions and rear-ending—and things like that."

"Hmm… Well, even Senjougahara looked like she was about to jump out onto the road, too…"

Though she had said that she had checked to make sure she was safe, most people would likely say the same. Even after they get into an accident, they might still insist that they had been safe.

"Ah, but, in Senjougahara's case it was because she had noticed a flower offering, I guess—so it's not really a problem of road structure or anything."

"Yeah. Well, that happens too. There's something I'm still curious about, and though I don't want to ruin the good intentions of the family that offered it, the next time I go out, I'll move where the bouquet is placed.

"...Okay, please go and do that."

As I thought that I should've been the one to do that when I had the chance, I wondered what sort of face I was making as I told him "please go and do that", but I suppose the only face I could've made was my own.

Though this guy is really insensitive when it comes to me, he's actually conscious of things like this, isn't he...

"In any case, let's get back on topic, Oshino."

"It's not something we need to get back to. We never got off topic in the first place—but either way, the problem is, though there are no cases of anybody jumping off the school building and committing suicide—or even cases of falling in an accident, there is for some reason a bouquet of flowers left on every building of your school—that was it, right?"

"Mm... Yeah, that's right."

Since Senjougahara had given me the ridiculous nickname of "Suicide- kun", I had thought more in the direction of a suicide occurring, but in terms of someone falling from the rooftop, it seems more normal to think that it was a fall accident.

For example, if I had fallen this morning, that would've been a fall accident...

"Well, whether or not it was an accident, the rooftop certainly a place where it's easy to fall from. That's why entry was prohibited."

"Well... Schools with open rooftops usually have their rooftops surrounded by some stupidly tall fences or something. In Naoetsu High's case, the fences were low enough for me to climb over."

"Right. ...Well, whether they're on a road or in a school or somewhere else, there are places where accidents and incidents are likely to occur—to put it simply, they're like the opposite of power spots?"

"...So, places that are bad spiritually? Um, I guess there were things like that. Like how the northeast direction is the unlucky 'demon's gate'."

Though I tried hard to show off the knowledge I could faintly remember, Oshino just said,

"No, that sort of thing's different."

and stopped my attempts with a single sentence.

He has no intentions of treating me nicely, does he?

What would he do if I actually had some great potential?

...Though I didn't know what kind of potential I could have.

"Of course, there are places that are bad for the spirit—in fact, I'm looking into those right now."

"?"

"No, forget that. It's still too early for you, Araragi-kun, and it's not important. Back to the main point. Since you keep changing the subject all the time, Araragi-kun, it's becoming a huge time loss."

"Wait, but you aren't really stretched for time right now, are you?"

It felt like he was intentionally being vague just then… but oh well. I'm not too interested in the particulars of Oshino's work.

Although, I did think that he was staying a long time in this town despite initially coming to investigate vampires.

"It's becoming a huge time Los Angeles."

"…If you have the time to say something that isn't funny at all, then it would be nice if you could go along with what I have to say sometimes."

"That road isn't to this extent, but in terms of places where it's easy for accidents to occur, from the point of view of a traveler like me, there's one in every part of the country. If you put up a pedestrian bridge here then wouldn't it obstruct people's vision, or if we start construction here, we won't be able to see if something comes out from the other side, or something like that—and also, for those who want to commit suicide, there are places that people are likely to choose to do so. The so-called popular suicide sites… Although, ultimately those are problems with the geography or the environment, and there's no spiritual component to it."

"…Uh-huh. Well, I guess that's the case. I didn't expect a specialist of oddities to say that, though."

"Yeah, well, I'm just anxious that people will tend to blame everything on some oddity whenever something negative occurs. Haha."

Oshino laughed in that way.

When I heard that, it made it seem like he had an admirable mentality, but honestly, the oddities are still sometimes responsible for negative occurrences in the world, so it feels like it would become something like the chicken or the egg argument…

"I didn't really think this case had to do with oddities, though. It's not really a 'scary story', nor is it an 'ominous story' like the shrine we talked about some time ago. Even Senjougahara had forgotten about it until yesterday, so at most it only gets on your mind just a little bit… It's just a 'strange story'."

"So by a 'little bit strange', do you mean 'Sukoshi Fushigi'?"

"No, I'm not trying to bring in Fujiko Fujio's works into this."

Well, in terms of nuances I guess it's the same feeling.

The "what the hell?" kind of feeling.

"Even the accident that happened on that road, like you said, had little to do with the work of an oddity—even Senjougahara being about to jump out wasn't caused by an oddity or a spirit or anything, and was just a problem with the angle of the bouquet, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Well, it could also be a problem with the geography or the environment. That's why I planned on changing the placement of the bouquet."

Oshino said this.

Araragi-kun, he said.

"The bouquet of flowers offered could be asking for accidents to happen—but don't you think the reverse could be true?"

005

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line.

But though I say now, the punch line occurred quite a while later—that is, because I came to an 'understanding' with Oshino's story, and because I had completely gotten rid of all the "strangeness" I had felt, I had forgotten to report back to Senjougahara in the end.

Since I hadn't contacted her, Senjougahara, the way she was, never bothered to touch on the subject again—and though I thought I would talk about it the next time I met her, but the next time I did meet her—that is, on Sunday, May 14—a rather big incident occurred, and I found it hard to bring this case up again, and in the end, I postponed it indefinitely.

And like before, Senjougahara must have forgotten about it as well.

I forgot about it in the same way.

When I finally remembered, it was near the end of May—I said to Senjoughara,

"I just remembered."

and told her.

"Long story short, they're just something like a link in the chain for rooftop control on the school's side—those bouquets."

"Rooftop control?"

Senjougahara gave me the reaction of remembering when I spoke to her, but she really was talented, responding so quickly as if she had remembered everything in an instant.

"Yeah, like setting the locks, or putting up the fences—well, if you compare them, the bouquets are more of a consolation, or a good-luck charm, or maybe something like a jinx."

"Bouquets—what kind of control do you get from putting bouquets on rooftops? Is it supposed to be a rooftop garden, or something—well, either way, it's in bad taste. Almost as bad as Araragi-kun's fashion sense."

"Don't just randomly attack my fashion sense!"

"Really, what's with that school uniform?"

"My street clothes are one thing, but don't criticize my uniform! Are you trying to make enemies out of every guy at Naoetsu High!"

"Well, I don't really care even if I make enemies out of every guy except Araragi-kun."

"In that case I'd become their enemy too! But anyway, it is kind of in bad taste..."

"Right?"

"No, not my fashion sense or my uniform, but the bouquet, okay? Like some sort of tasteless conspiracy—I don't know who thought of it, but by placing a bouquet that makes it seem like it's saying 'somebody died here', it's paradoxically acting as a warning that says 'this place is dangerous'..."

"Acting as a warning...? Something like, 'Frequent accidents ahead'?"

"Yeah. Like at popular suicide sites, there are signs trying to get you to not commit suicide, or something... But a sign like that is what makes a popular suicide site into a popular suicide site... Anyway, there must've been someone who thought that just saying it was dangerous would be too commonplace and wouldn't have enough of an effect. But if there was a stronger message, like 'someone died here in the past', then—"

"....."

There will be cases where, like Senjougahara, people will notice the bouquets and end up stepping onto the streets—but when Oshino spoke of 'the reverse', then normally when someone saw a bouquet like that, they would think that there must have been an accident here, and it could be dangerous around here, and that they better be careful.

So to provoke people into being more careful.

The school placed bouquets on the rooftops.

"...So it would be like placing crows' corpses to protect against crows? If you did that, the crows would be on their guard and not get closer, right? ...But, could there be any

effect other than a jinx? Like placing a crow's corpse, instead of a bouquet if you placed the corpse of someone who actually got into an accident..."

"Don't come up with terrifying ideas—are you a demon? Well, rather than a consolation, Oshino it was something more like playing around. Since the locked door and the fences would normally be enough—it's just that it's not completely perfect. After all, there are actually students like you that lie in order to get onto the rooftop."

"Wait a second, Araragi-kun. Could you not talk about people as if they were liars? I just happen to be honey-mouthed."

"Poison-mouthed is more like it. Poison that tastes good is the worst kind, isn't it? So, knowing that the control wasn't perfect, the school placed that good-luck charm, that consolation there—because no one would think that people would place flowers for a nonexistent dead person."

"Hmm..."

It seemed like Senjougahara understood as well.

Well, when it was explained like that, it just seemed like an obvious, completely ordinary solution that had no problems.

There was no strangeness.

Nor was there any room for suspicion to make its way in.

As for the story itself, it had an imprudent kind of appeal to it—it just wasn't the sort of stories Oshino was collecting.

You could even say it was a story that was barely worth any coins.

Incidentally, it's possible that even Hanekawa had knowledge of this case—and even the truth concerning it, eliminating any need to take the story to Oshino.

"However, something else that's strange comes to mind. How did Oshino-san know something like that? There may have been an example like this before. But how was he able to come to that conclusion just from hearing Araragi-kun's story?"

"It's not really a conclusion he came to... But see. Both of us were misunderstanding in the same way... But whether it's a suicide or an accident, if someone had fallen from the rooftop, then normally you wouldn't offer flowers on the roof, right?"

"Ah."

"You'd put them on the ground where they fell."

In cases of a traffic accident, you couldn't place flowers in the middle of the road on the very spot they lost their lives—but for a fall accident, you can place them near the surface of the earth. After all, the victim loses his life at the ground, not on the rooftop.

"I see… That was a misunderstanding, wasn't it. But it's a mistake anyone could make, isn't it."

"You're quick to cover for yourself, aren't you…"

"Well, whether it's a jinx or not, it's there as a countermeasure for falling, but if the other party was aware of that discrepancy, they'd know that the flowers have no extra meaning to them—although."

There wouldn't be any need to place flowers anymore—said Senjougahara, looking up at the rooftop of the school building. The school building currently in the middle of improvement—where they were installing new, taller fences.

The fact that improvements on the rooftop had started was what caused me to remember this case. And then report back to Senjougahara nearly twenty days late… But, there just wasn't anything like the pressure in my chest being relieved or anything.

I would even say that completely forgetting about the case was more comfortable for me—because, right now, the reason why such improvements on the rooftop became necessary was because, a rumor that went something like "the other day, there was a student that entered the rooftop from the outside" began to spread.

Even the school probably hadn't imagined the existence of someone stupid enough to enter the rooftop from the outside—for someone trespassing from the outside, the bouquets wouldn't be effective either.

The cost of establishing the new fence.

If it happened to be a hundred thousand yen, then it would be inexcusable.

And, if it was revealed that the true identity of that trespasser was me—I wouldn't be excused just from dropping out of school. Naturally, Senjougahara, who had suggested it, would also be in danger.

"…Araragi-kun."

"I know. This'll be a secret between the two of us."

"No… It's not enough to become a secret, I think."

"What do you want me to do if it's not enough?"

"We'll just continue on like we did before."

"Like we did before?"

"Let's forget about it."

Although she had to do something about Oshino-san's hundred thousand yen before she forgot about it.

Said Senjougahara Hitagi in that usual monotone, without showing any emotion.



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	

6
June

Koyomi Sand

001

The place where I came to know Hachikuji Mayoi—the place where we came to know each other's circumstances—was at the park whose name I could not read, but since then, I have always met her on a road.

In the beginning, when she was at the park, she had gotten lost as she tried to visit her mother, and so I wondered if she held any sort of personal opinion in regards to roads, and asked her about it one day.

How...

How exactly do you treat the road you walk on?—in other words, it was simply a question of how you treat your own life.

I'll say this for good measure, but I didn't think that I was capable of asking that question to myself—I believed that however she lived was unrelated to me.

If saying that it was unrelated was too insensible of me, then how about, the way of life that Hachikuji followed—and if that's too arbitrary of a wording, then I'll say that I wonder about Hachikuji's reasons.

Regardless of whether she was my friend.

On top of that, regardless of whether she was a selfless, unmatched friend like Hanekawa—because I didn't have the right to interfere in her lifestyle.

Of course, the way she died may be a part of it...

"Roads, that is to say, from my point of view,"

said Hachikuji.

She responded to my question like this.

"They're just places to walk on, though."

No, no.

That's just simply the definition of the word road, isn't it?—Not that, I wanted to ask about a more conceptual definition of the road.

"No, no, Araragi-san. It's the same thing! The road is a place to walk on."

Hachikuji did not waver in the face of my bold correction. In that ever-grinning way, she continued gracefully.

"Roads, no matter what they are, always connect one place to another—no matter the start, no matter the goal, that doesn't change. Normally, you can't call a road a dead end, right?"

Basically, said Hachikuji.

"Thinking things like what kind of a road is this, where does it continue on to, this unstable road feels like it'll collapse, and that you want to switch roads—it shouldn't be a problem to think about that. However, there's one thing that you absolutely must not do. It's a taboo where if you do it, the very moment you do it, the road will stop being a road."

When I asked what that taboo was, Hachikuji responded like this.

She, who spent a long time as a lost child, responeded like this.

"That is, to stop walking."

As soon as you stop, the road stops being a road.

002

"Ah… Good morning, Tiredragi-san."

"Wait a minute, Hachikuji. Don't call out to me with that weariness that makes it look like you're fed up with talking to me. My name is Araragi."

"Sorry, I fumbled over my words."

"No, it was on purpose…"

"I fumble-stumbled."

"It wasn't on purpose!?"

The middle of June.

Halfway through the month.

When I spotted Hachikuji as usual as I was walking on the roads, I greeted her as I always did—and, as usual, Hachikuji bit her tongue over my name.

And this time it was a bad way of fumbling.

You can't be tired of me yet!

I haven't even chatted with you that much for you to be tired yet. We haven't chatted nearly enough.

I'll make you chat with me more.

"Please don't make it out to be the fault of the person who bit her tongue. I was just speaking normally, but it's just that unexpectedly a person with a name that's easy to fumble over happened to appear, right?"

"Don't make you speaking and me appearing into two different things. Don't separate them. It's because I with my easy-to-fumble name appeared that you started speaking, isn't it?"

"No, but please think about it, Araragi-san. I seem to quite frequently bite my tongue over the name Araragi-san, but Araragi-san has never once bit his tongue over mine, correct? That means that the problem is that Araragi-san's name is what's making me bite my tongue, correct? Basically, that means the blame is on Araragi-san."

"What sort of logic are you using to put the blame onto me? Aren't you skipping a step in the reasoning? You're the one fumbling and biting your tongue, so it's your fault, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is true that I've taken a bite out of this situation as well."

"Don't get clever with me. You're the only one biting your tongue."

Incidentally, I wondered how I would fumble over Hachikuji's name if I ever did—Hachikuji, Hachikuji, Hachikuji.

It's no use.

It's really easy to say.

"So, Araragi-san."

For a change.

Hachikuji asked me this.

"Where are you headed to today?"

"As you can see, I'm off to school now. I told you the other day, didn't I? I've changed jobs from a stupid delinquent into a student who's sincere about his work. So I'm going to school."

"Although, even insincere students go to school, too."

"Now see here, Hachikuji, don't make fun of my insincerity up until now. In my first and second years of high school, where do you think I went while I pretended that I was going to school?"

"Where did you go?"

"I went shopping at the mall!"

"That's quite a superficial insincerity..."

"And since I didn't have any money, I window shopped!"

"Are you an adult female?"

Well.

Even if adult female may have been a strange term to use, thinking back on it now, I really wonder why I did something like that. Even I think it was a puzzling behavior.

Did I really want to look at the shop's windows so much to the point of risking being caught?

Though those experiences never really left any impression on me in the end… And there were no pluses for my life, either.

"....."

No, that wasn't it. Most likely, in those days I just didn't want to go to school—and I didn't want to stay at home, either.

So, going and doing things anywhere but those two places would've made me happy—and I must have felt like I was being saved.

Though I didn't know what I was being saved from.

To that feeling that was like being saved.

"Haa… Well, then. It's like you've put your escapism into practice, isn't it? A surface-to-air escape. I had thought that Araragi-san was hopeless, but I didn't know you were that hopeless of a person."

"Oi oi, that's a bit harsh."

"Would it be all right if I called you Hopeless-san from now on?"

"Don't make insults in such a concerned way! There's no part of my name left behind in that case! There's nothing for me to take a bite out of!"

"But, if you think about it, your name was never something that could be left behind in the first place, was it?"

"I never had any plans to leave my name behind in history, but even so, I don't think I want to leave the name Hopeless-san behind!"

Well.

I had absolutely no idea what she's talking about when she says surface-to-air escape, but putting escapism into practice was true—if I had continued my high school life in that way, it could have become something drastic by now.

I would have taken a false step.

And that would have been inexcusable…

When I think about that, I remember the spring break when I met Hanekawa—when I met Shinobu.

And then when I met Senjougahara, that could possibly have been a huge turning point in my life.

"Well, you never know. Walking on the roads means you get to meet new people, after all."

"Ohh. You're saying something pretty good, aren't you, Hachikuji."

"That's right. That's why, just as Araragi-san says, meeting with those people has marked a huge halfway point in your life!

"No, no! It's not the halfway point, it's a turning point! It's way too early to call it a halfway point!"

"Well, well, they say geniuses and idiots die early deahts, after all."

"It's pretty clear that you're bundling me up with the idiots, you know! A halfway point, really! If I have to say it, then since I'm 18 years old right now, that means I'd only live to 36!"

"Ah. Now this is a surprise. So you could do multiplication, Araragi-san."

"H-how little did you think I was capable of?"

I thought you knew that math was my strong point?

Math was the sole foundation, or perhaps guideline, that made my job change from a dunce to a prepared student.

"But you know, Araragi-san. Regardless of whether math is one's strong point or weak point, don't you think it's amazing that anyone is capable of multiplication and division? Everyone ends up learning it some way or another, but it's actually a rather advanced concept. Multiplication and division."

"Hmm… Now that you mention it, that might be true. I don't know who established it or when it was established, but the person who made it so that you learned your times tables in second grade must have been a pretty amazing person."

Thinking about it, the idea that you should start teaching English to children when they're young might not be wrong.

"Well, in order to tackle the entrance exams, I first have to properly graduate from high school, after all. I might have said it before, but anyway, in that way, I'm headed towards school. Aren't I great? I'm as great as the person who started teaching multiplication to second graders, right?"

"Like I said, anyone can go to school, though..."

"And with that, Hachikuji, I don't have any more time to talk with you."

I got back on the bicycle that I had been pushing along to match Hachikuji's steps. It was a granny bike used just for going to school. Although, since the mountain bike that I didn't use for going to school had been destroyed due to unforeseen circumstances, there wasn't really any need to crown this granny bike with the description of "used for going to school".

It was a bit weird to call it a granny bike when there was no granny riding on it, though... Even my mom rides something of a monster-like motorcycle.

"Then, goodbye. There's no need to miss me. When you want to meet me again, I'll gallantly appear in front of you."

"In that case, are we saying goodbye for the last time?"

"What! Why! Just say you want to meet me again!"

"I kind of think it's a pain, though..."

Hachikuji said with a reluctant face.

She had no intention of hiding her feelings from me, who had given up on trying to look cool.

It was true that you receive quite a lot of damage when you are hated by a kid, and I tried and failed to push down on my pedals.

I missed my chance to make a graceful exit—um, well, this might be a good chance, too. I wondered if there was anything I should say to Hachikuji.

Ah.

That's right.

"Hey, Hachikuji."

"What is it, Onlyonegi-san?"

"Onlyonegi-san? What's that, did you mess up my name? Or did you get rid of three and two?"

"Ah, no need to worry, that was not a case of me fumbling. Araragi-san seemed like the type of guy that would be the only one left when a class divided into groups, so it's a new nickname."

"What do you mean I'd be the only one left!"

Why is it that anyone and everyone wants to give me bad nicknames?

"There’s something that I need to say to you."

"What is it?"

"Oshino,"

I said.

"Oshino Meme—that old specialist guy that helped you out. He left town."

It was quite recently, too.

In the same way he had aimlessly appeared in this town one day, he just as aimlessly vanished—most likely, off to some other town.

And he’d do the same as he did in this town, collecting stories about oddities—and he’d probably look after the kind of person that seemed to be all over the place—basically, someone like me, who had no idea what to do about himself.

"Haa… Well, that was quite sudden, wasn’t it."

"Well, it certainly was sudden, but he was always a wanderer with no roots, so if you look at it from his point of view, it might seem like he’s had quite a long stay—And, since you’ve never met him directly, this might not be of any concern to you… Well, though you aren’t indifferent to it. I thought I should tell you just in case."

"Please don’t say that it’s not of any concern to me. In comparison to the amount of gratitude I have to offer that person, Araragi-san is nothing special."

"It’s good to show your gratitude, but don’t make me into something insignificant. Even I have a considerable amount of gratitude towards him."

"But really, no matter how many times you show your thanks to Moshino-san, it just won’t be enough."

"Who exactly is Moshino-san? Don’t say the name of the person you’re thankful for like it’s the Moshimo Box from Doraemon!"

"Although the Moshimo Box is carried by Dorami-chan. You know, that prettified girl."

"Don’t say prettified."

"Heh… So, has Oshino-san gone away, then?"

As I thought, Moshino and so on were obviously on purpose (fumbling over my name was also probably on purpose as well), so Hachikuji said his name normally and nodded.

"But, if that’s true then it’s a problem, isn’t it? How does Araragi-plan to survive from now on?"

"No, even if Oshino’s gone, I’m not going to end up on the roads or anything!?"

Did you think that he was the one giving me food and shelter?

Although, it's true that I wasn't too happy relying on him so much when oddities were involved—but, I won't do that anymore.

And that goes for all of us.

All of us have to walk with our own two feet—on our own paths.

"Well, if you were to start living on the streets, that would become very lonely. Ah, but, Araragi-san. What happens with that case, then?"

"That case? What case?"

"Are you playing dumb again~? You're really putting on airs~. You're really good at teasing~. Araragi-san, you're a big teaser, huh~."

"What's with that character… Who are you trying to be?"

Normally in cases like these, this kind of person never says anything important, and if they do then that meant they were just pretending, but I wonder what it is this time.

"Ah, could this be something I wasn't supposed to bring up? Could I have brought up something taboo? Did I bring up the dark side of the Araragi industry?"

"And what the heck is the Araragi industry? There's no way an industry with such a narrow scope could be formed. What is it, Hachikuji? If you have something to say then just say it clearly and quickly. This isn't like you."

"I don't want someone of the Araragi industry to tell me what is and isn't like me."

"Whether I have or don't have the qualifications to tell you what you're like is a different matter, but don't call me someone of the Araragi industry. I'm just Araragi.

"Like I said~ It's this, you see, this."

Hachikuji made a ring with her thumb and index finger.

Good!

Okay!

If it didn't mean that, then it must mean money.

"……?"

No, even if I think that it must be a sign for money, I didn't understand the meaning of such a sudden hand gesture. I was sure that there was no money that I was to be paying to Hachikuji, though (no matter what the sign meant)…

Or does it mean that what Hachikuji is talking about requires money? This grade schooler, is she running a system like a night shop?

Doesn’t that mean I can’t just carelessly talk to her?

"Hm? Huh, your reaction is slow, isn’t it?"

"No, I really don’t know what you’re trying to say…"

"Ah, then perhaps it might be better if I said this, Araragi-san."

Hachikuji withdrew that frank hand gesture and instead said this in a well-mannered way.

"Your failure to pay the 5 million yen is much appreciated."

"I didn’t fail to pay it!"

Ah.

So that’s what it was—I see.

I had told her earlier that I owed a 5 million yen to Oshino—or, rather than telling her, I asked her for advice.

I know people would tell me not to ask for debt advice from a grade schooler, but the relationship between Hachikuji and me was one where I could tell her anything—and though I said that, I never really explained the details.

Basically, I took on jobs involving oddities for Oshino’s sake… And by accepting orders from him almost as if he had passed the entire job onto me, I was able to write off that debt, but I had forgotten to tell her about that—the fact that I had consulted her about it and then had forgotten to tell her about what happened afterwards was completely my fault.

But it seemed that Hachikuji interpreted the story as Oshino having left town without receiving payment from me.

What a unique interpretation.

Her farfetched interpretations were rather extreme—did she think I was the kind of person that defaulted on my debts?

"Look, Hachikuji. I’m the kind of guy that returns money he borrows."

"Well, is that so… That’s a good attitude to have, but it’s also normal."

It was a normal reaction.

"To begin with, we’re talking about borrowing money that you can’t repay, aren’t you?"

"That’s different, Hachikuji. Society as a whole fundamentally runs on debts, you know. Even individuals and corporations are covered in debt. For credit cards and loans and securities, everyone borrows money from somebody, and they work with all their might to pay it back. How much do you think Japan has in debt?”

"If you say it like that then that may be true… But then, doesn't that make the world seem a bit sad?"

"It isn't sad. Debts are something like a promise. It's the confidence that someday, in the future, you'll be able to repay that debt using your own money. So, the world runs on promises and futures and confidence."

"You're putting it in a pretty good way…"

"Mhm."

Although there's a lot of suffering and distress within the gaps between those promises and futures and confidence, but I'll keep that a secret.

Just until the other day, even I was like that.

Well, if I include that, then I guess the world runs on promises and futures and confidence and secrets—incidentally, Senjougahara has also properly paid the costs to Oshino.

Although unlike me, who had repaid him with work, she had made her payment in cash—it wasn't by a part-time job but by helping out with her father's work that she was able to earn money to wrap up her payment.

She somehow managed to get through with it, but to earn a hundred thousand yen in such a short time, what sort of help did she give, that girl…?

"Anyway, I've properly repaid my debt to Oshino. With that over with, I'm completely debt-free and clean."

"A clean exterior, with an unclean mind, you mean?"

"My mind isn't unclean! I believe in Santa Claus and all that!"

"You do?"

"That's right. Since he still brings me presents even now."

"You're in high school, and you're still getting presents from Santa Claus…?"

"How about it, then? A clean body and a clean mind! The only remaining debts I have would be the three thousand yen I've borrowed from my sisters!"

"Please return at least that much."

"My principle is if it's not worth returning, I won't even respond to a text message!"

"Although you don't have any friends, anyway…"

Weren't you a guy who returns the money he borrows, says Hachikuji with a rather forced sigh.

Now that I think about it I get the feeling I'd said that earlier, but normally, when I speak to Hachikuji, I get caught up in the flow of things, but there shouldn't be any problems if you could just forget all the jokes made in the previous page by the time you get to the next one.

"Is that so? Well, in the end, it's good to hear that you've paid your debts back. Hmm, but I'm a little disappointed by that."

"Eh? Why? Why are you disappointed that I repaid Oshino? Did you want me to be the kind of characcter that was always in debt? Are you aiming to repossess my land?"

"What land do you own in the first place, Araragi-san? No, that's not it—see, didn't I tell you the other day?"

"The other day? Um, when?"

"When you were being stalked by that very fast junior of yours. You were asking me, I owe a huge amount of money to Oshino-san, and what should I do—or something like that. And, during that conversation, didn't you say something like, even if you didn't have any hard cash, if there was an unusual story about an oddity, you'd be able to turn it into cash—right?"

"Ah. Did I say all that?"

Well, I must have.

Because I was going every which way thanks to that 'very fast junior of mine', I really didn't have much memory of it… but I knew I did talk to her about my debt, so it wouldn't be strange if I talked about that much.

Though I couldn't have used the phrase 'hard cash'…

"So it would be like, in trading cards, when you can exchange rare cards with someone, right?"

"Er, making such a childish comparison like that does make you seem like a grade schooler, but that comparison is slightly off from reality…"

But if we really had to compare it with trading cards, it would be more like selling that rare card off for money, but it's hard to say that in an appropriate way.

I can't have this good kid mimicking that.

"So anyway, Araragi-san. Since then, I was wondering if I could be of any help to Araragi-san, so during my walks, I've been looking for stories like those. 'Oddity stories', or even 'ghost stories'."

"Oh, ohh. Were you really doing that for me?"

I was really moved.

I was moved by Hachikuji Mayoi's friendship.

To think that this cheeky girl would be concerned over the debt I held, and would cooperate in its repayment for me…

I've been underestimating her.

I thought she was just someone who didn't like me… but this fifth-grader really was wonderful.

"In a way, it's like the getting support from my wife!"

"Er, it's a bit weird to call it the support of your wife."

"In a way, it's like life support!"

"Er, I wasn't exactly trying to help out in the health care industry for Araragi-san's sake—well, anyway, for Araragi-san's sake, I was doing that in secret. I can't help but be disappointed knowing that it isn't going to be of any help."

"Ah… In that case, I can see why."

"In terms of the level of disappointment, it's around the same as Japan's Top Three Most Disappointing Places."

"You can't be that disappointed! And what do you mean by Japan's Top Three Most Disappointing Places, anyway?"

"Places where, when you visit, you're disappointed that you weren't as disappointed as you expected you'd be."

Sheesh, went Hachikuji.

"Now my scheme to sell this story I managed to find to Araragi-san for a high price is ruined."

"Scheme!? High price!? Eh, you weren't going to give it to me!? It wasn't going to be a Present-For-Me?"

"It wasn't."

Hachikuji seemed unhappy.

"What do you mean, a 'Present-For-Me'? Please just get your presents from Santa Claus. If there's anything I would've done for you for free, Araragi-san, it would've been a presentation on how you could become an upstanding citizen."

"That sounds like a strict presentation…"

Or rather, it's a scary story in another way.

In short, this kid wanted to get me to buy an oddity story off of her…? To think that she's been hustling through town since then makes me think that she has an extraordinary tenacity towards money.

Well, instead of hustling through town, you could say she was trying to hustle me out of my money.

No, in this case, instead of money being her goal, it's possible she was trying to get some enjoyment out of driving me further into debt…

It was a close call.

It was actually a good thing for Oshino to have me do work for him before that happened.

"Haa, this isn't good for me. This was a huge speculation, too. What should I do with this oddity story that I hoped I could sell to Araragi-san?"

"Um, I don't know."

If it was like this, the fact that Oshino had gone really left an impression. If he had stayed even after I repaid my debt, then I may have been able to get some money by selling the story Hachikuji found to him, but since he had closed up shop, there was no one in this town that would claim gossip and rumors like that.

Hmm.

As you'd expect, an amateur speculator is likely to fail… It sure is scary.

"Araragi-sa~n. Now that it's like this, I won't go as high as five million yen, so please buy it~. It'll be a bargain~. Will you be okay with making me think that I've worked for nothing? An innocent, unaware child will disappear from this world, and a precocious one will take her place, you know?"

"I don't care if you become precocious or not. Besides, you're plenty precocious enough to try and sell off a ghost story to your friend, aren't you!"

Well, even so.

Even though she said so under the pretense of evil intentions, the fact that Hachikuji had done it for my sake wasn't a complete lie, so it probably wouldn't be good to make her think that it was all for nothing.

It might be bad in educational terms, but there's also the fact that if she learns that 'it'll be useless to try and help out Araragi-san anymore,' it's possible that some anxiety for the future might remain.

Since even someone like her might be useful to me in the future, it might not be a bad idea to be nice to her right now.

"Oh? Could you perhaps be scheming something bad? Araragi-san."

"What are you talking about? I'm still moved to tears by your friendship right now."

"It's been a pretty long time now… So, your emotions have continued to move, is that it? Doesn't that mean your emotions are unstable, Araragi-san?"

"Incidentally, how much were you aiming to sell it for, Hachikuji?"

"Around fifty yen is fine."

"That's cheap!"

And here I thought she would be overcharging me.

What, is this the price of our friendship?

"Well, you see, this story was worth only that much from the beginning."

"Were you planning on selling a story worth only fifty yen to your friend for five million yen!?"

Were you even seeing me as a friend!?

I'd just be a sitting duck, right!?

"Cut it out, you… That'll make me the duck that comes carrying the leek on my back, right!?"

"You'd become Duckleek-san, right?"

"Don't call me Duckleek-san. That just doesn't sound palatable. In both ways!"

I looked in my pockets and brought out a fifty-yen coin that just happened to be there. Well, even if I had a hundred-yen coin, I wouldn't have asked for change, but since it turned out like this, it was a bit unfortunate for Hachikuji.

"So, what kind of a story is it? Tell me."

"Yes. Eh, so it's a story about sand."

"Sand?"

"Yes. Well, I say sand, but—ah, but before that, could I ask one thing, Araragi-san?"

"Hm? What is it?"

"It's about how Oshino-san took his leave from those cram school ruins… In that case, the vampire that I hear about, the one that had gotten lost earlier, Oshino Shinobu-san—how is she doing now? I wouldn't think Oshino-san took her with him…"

"Ah, about her—"

As I spoke, I looked at my shadow.

My dark, deep, and pitch black shadow.

"—Er, no, I'll already be pretty late even after hearing your story out, you know."

I'll tell you some other time, I said.

I had dodged the question.

003

Though Hachikuji had said 'sand', to be more accurate it was about a 'sandbox'—that is, a sandbox in a small park.

It was a different park from the one I had met Hachikuji at—well, it wasn't anything like the park I played in when I was a kid and I thought that all parks mostly looked the same anyway, but in one respect, this park was different from the one I had met Hachikuji at, White Wave Park (I don't know if it's supposed to be Namishiro or Rouhaku), because it had quite a lot of variation in its playground equipment like a seesaw and a jungle gym despite how small it was.

Of course, a sandbox, as well.

It was a sandbox that came as a set with a slide—well, since the slide was just a slide, the sandbox was, in the same way, just a regular old sandbox without any sort of strangeness.

However, that was as a result of its 'sandbox' design—the 'sand' itself certainly had that odd phenomenon that Hachikuji had talked about.

An odd phenomenon.

A bizarre phenomenon.

If I called it that it might seem a bit exaggerated—but if anyone suddenly witnessed or was shown this in the middle of the night, they would no doubt be hit with shock.

"Yes, you could say I was hit with shock as well. Though, it's not quite the level of being hit with shock, so you could say I hit it off."

"It isn't like you suddenly got friendly or anything."

"I hit my stride."

"In these cases, shouldn't you fall out of stride instead!?"

Interposed between those back-and-forths were Hachikuji's explanations, most of which I was able to understand easily. Like Senjougahara, it seemed she was contracting some disease in which she had to attack me at every other word or feel uneasy about herself.

Well, it was quite likely for that to actually happen.

And if it did happen then it would be a disease impossible to fully cure, so it would be better if I worked hard to prevent that.

After that, the warning bell had already rung, but I was somehow able to slide into the classroom before the actual bell rang, and after that I spent the next six hours working as a sincere student, and finally after that, on the road home from studying at Senjougahara's place for the finals, I went towards the park I had heard about from Hachikuji.

It was night.

It would probably be good to say it was the middle of the night.

Hachikuji hadn't gotten the name of the park, and I couldn't see anything like a sign as I entered—but despite that, when I looked in the sandbox, I was definitely sure that this was the sandbox that Hachikuji had told me about. After all, I've been often told that seeing is believeing.

When I looked at that sandbox.

It was obvious in a single glance.

"Although… Even if seeing is believing, that doesn't mean it's case closed—"

Though it was dark, I still had the eyesight of a vampire, or at least the after-effects of that vampirism—and that was perfect for the current situation. It felt like I had equipped high-precision night vision goggles.

And, when looking through those goggles—on the surface of the sand, a 'picture' had been drawn.

Although, instead of it having been drawn.

It looked more like it had risen to the surface.

How should I put it—perhaps I could say this because I was still feeling the remnants of vampirism—but it looked like the expression of a demon.

A bloodcurdling drawing.

As if the sand itself.

Was almost—like an oddity.

"I think Oshino had said this sometime ago… The simulacrum phenomenon, was it?… People will end up noticing human faces in anything, or something…"

Well, I could understand that.

But rather than a human face, how was it if it was the face of a demon? No, well, when you think of ghost photography, assuming it wasn't edited, it would just be that you

could see a random light or shadow, or mist or trash, as ‘something like that’ in the end…

Because Hachikuji was going around looking for some strange or suspicious phenomenon to try and sell to me—it’s possible she might gone and seen the originally normal sandbox and its terrain as something more mysterious.

And, having been preceded by Hachikuji, I took on the same preconceptions as her and then came to this sandbox—and, therefore, got the same impression as well.

Just like the statue case from April.

Just like the bouquet case from May.

It must be like that—the possibility that this time was to be the same as the other cases was something to consider naturally; however, that would only be the case if Hachikuji and I had seen it on the same day.

But it was different from the statue or the bouquet.

Sand was only solid as grains, but as a whole it had no fixed shape—so was it possible to see the same ‘demon expression’ on different days?

It wasn’t like a love message that two lovers would write on a beach—but fundamentally, the shape of sand can even be changed just by the wind. That’s why sandboxes can be found at playgrounds.

It would only be natural that, in the few weeks between when Hachikuji discovered the ‘drawn’ demon in this park’s sandbox and when I came to confirm it, a number of kids should certainly have come and played in the sandbox.

Making a mountain or digging out a tunnel through that mountain, or digging a hole… Or perhaps even going all out and building a castle.

Something like that should have occurred—so was it possible for the sandbox to look the same way twice? In other words, no matter how it was changed or mixed around, the sand in this sandbox—always returned to a demon’s shape.

A recurring bizarreness.

As if the sand had a will of its own—

"…But is there anything like a sand oddity? Like, maybe, the Sand-throwing Woman? Although, that would actually have someone there as a youkai, not the sand itself being the youkai…"

Though I did remember someone like that, not as a youkai, but a superhuman.

In the manga ‘Kinnikuman’, if I recall correctly there was a superhuman called Sunshine—but anyway, even if that was the case, it’s hard to believe that someone like that came and shaped the sand just before I suddenly visited.

But, recently, I had run into situations where I thought I would die because of oddities twice in a row… So when I hear about oddities, I can't help but feel a bit wary.

"……"

Anyway.

Since I confirmed that the info I bought from Hachikuji for fifty yen wasn't bogus, what was I to do now—though it wasn't that I came just to satisfy my own curiosity.

But if there was some sort of actual crisis because of this, it would be hard to leave it alone, even just with the fact that it was a park—I wouldn't have been interested had I not heard about it, but now that I did hear about it, I didn't want to ignore it completely. If I could free myself from any weird fears just by dropping in on the way back, it would be a guilty pleasure.

…Was guilty pleasure even the right term?

I still needed to brush up on my language skills.

But either way, I wasn't the kind of person that went around looking for trouble like my clamorous sisters, but if some unforeseen incident occurred and I learned about it, I wouldn't be able to sit still.

Like this hazardous… Or rather.

Like this unidentifiable sandbox.

For an extreme example, if it happened to curse kids who played in it, then that really wouldn't be funny—and if I needed to investigate then I had to investigate quickly.

But a high schooler found playing with the sand in the park with nobody else in it would be even more suspicious than any oddity.

"Well… Even so, if thinking about it normally, it has to be just somebody playing around. Like, a high schooler playing with the sand in the park with nobody else in it—"

When I considered that, it sounded like a rather unreasonable hypothesis, but, well, once you removed the high-schooler requirement, it actually seemed possible.

Drawing in the sandbox as a prank to scare kids that want to play in it… No, it's possible it isn't even a prank.

It could even be the actions of a guardian.

Since there are parents that aren't comfortable with their kids dirtying their clothes and hands in a sandbox or whatever—so, to keep the kids from using the sandboxes, they drew these kinds of pictures to shock or frighten them… And if it wasn't something so neurotic, there was the possibility of it being a matter of 'night control' for the park.

Resembling Naoetsu High placing bouquets on the rooftops—the drawing could be there to clear people out of the park… or not.

Although I had promised Senjougahara that we would forget about that case. It's no good to start remembering it now.

Either way, the possibility of it being an artificial phenomenon was pretty high—it wasn't really that I was taking into account about what Oshino had said about not being happy with blaming everything on oddities; it was just that whenever something happened, I tried to choose the explanation with the highest possibility or the most natural.

If something happened, it was more likely to be accurate that a human, not an oddity, was the cause—although, even if I said that with the remnants of my vampirism, I didn't feel like it was very persuasive.

For that matter, by the time I had come to the park, hadn't I already started doubting the 'sand' here starting from Hachikuji's story?

"Let's see…"

And with that, I went inside the sandbox. At that moment, I realized just then that I hadn't taken off my shoes, although there wasn't really a rule that said that you could only enter the sandbox with bare feet.

Hmm.

Well, I had planned on doing a serious investigation, but something like this was turning out to encourage the child within me. Since I had entered middle school—no, perhaps even since the later years of elementary school—the sandbox was only where the long jump took place, not a place to play in.

Having gone back to being a child again, I thought I'd go and try the nearby slide while I was at it, but that would be way too frivolous no matter how you looked at it.

If I at least looked like I was doing an investigation then I could probably make an excuse for it, but if I was witnessed doing something like that then it could turn out to be a huge disaster.

I'd be asked,

'Why the hell were you doing something like that!'

and I'd answer something like,

'It's an oddity, it's because of an oddity!'

And at that rate, I'd be dragged to at the very least the police…

"…Hah."

Squatting down inside the sandbox, I gently scooped up some of the sand. By the time I had stepped inside, the demon's expression that had been drawn on the surface had become messed up, but that just seemed to make it look worse.

Though I had said investigation, it looked more like I was only disturbing the situation at hand, but, well, it would be impossible for me to figure everything out while sitting in one place in the same way Oshino can.

I had no choice but to go along with this destructive examination.

I'd often read in mystery novels that preserving the crime scene is the basis of an investigation, but it's really an impossible challenge for an amateur to conduct an investigation without some sort of damage to the scene.

"...But this is just regular sand, in the end. Although, I'm not exactly an expert on sand..."

I could only see it as sand that you'd find in the sandbox of a normal park.

Meanwhile, as I carried out this investigation that could also be called 'playing in the sand', the 'demon's face' that had been there had completely disappeared with no traces left—and of course, it didn't do anything like automatically reform itself afterward.

"....."

As an experiment, I tried making a small hill.

Maybe if I played in the same way a kid would play in this sandbox, there would be some kind of response—but there was nothing like that either.

I only managed to accomplish making a dull-looking hill.

As I thought to myself for a minute, that sand hill collapsed on its own and leveled itself out again. Wiping my sandy hands, I stepped outside the sandbox—and I only realized when I went out that my shoes had somehow gotten filled with sand, too, even though I hadn't planned on playing, or even investigating, so roughly.

Well, even outside of sand, small grains always manage to get into your shoes wherever you are, anyway... And as I thought that, I knocked the sand out of my shoes one at a time, back into the sandbox.

As a result of having trampled on it severely, the sandbox looked like a normal sandbox—and looking at the current state, it seemed like it would be rather hard for that 'demon' to somehow reappear again.

Even making a small hill was harder than I had expected—so taking the entire sandbox and making it into the shape of a face, and it doesn't even have to be a demon's face, would mean you'd need the ability to treat the entirety of the sandbox as a canvas...

In other words, I feel like you'd need quite a lot of artistic ability. Although, since it's technically three-dimensional, it might be more craftsmanship ability?

At the very least, for someone like me who couldn't even make a proper shed, it would be an impossible act. Was there someone around here who was informed in the arts, an artistic guardian or perhaps an artistic prankster?

Wait, but if it was like that, then it's possible that they would be doing it for the sake of art… But then, not just this park, but even White Wave Park—they'd be going around and making the same kind of art in sandboxes in parks here and there. There was the question of why someone would choose sandboxes as their art form, but they could be thinking that it becomes artistic because it's short-lived or something—it was a way of thinking that I couldn't possibly comprehend, but I could comprehend that a way of thinking like that could exist. Although, I could understand that it was along the lines of writing a love message on the beach…

"Well, since I, with my vampire remnants, played in this sandbox with nothing happening—I can at least say that there's nothing urgent that I need to take care of."

Though it was night, the light of the moon still formed a shadow for me. Looking at that shadow—looking at that ordinary shadow, I whispered that.

I can only say that I was asking for some confirmation. Even though I knew I wouldn't get a response, I still didn't have a choice.

Though I knew I wouldn't get an answer.

I still continued to call to her, as if it was natural.

"Whether it's a prank, art, or some parent being overprotective—and honestly, it might not be something as impressive as that, but either way, it doesn't seem like there's any need for me to get involved. If it's an oddity, it's not going to show itself so easily, but it could also be the work of a human."

Saying that, I left the park behind.

Well, to call it a mistake might be being too hard on myself—but if there was a mistake I made at that moment, it would be rigidly fixing my mind upon the idea that if it wasn't an oddity, it had to be an artificial phenomenon—and that if it wasn't an artificial phenomenon, then it had to be an oddity.

A rigidness like that.

If Oshino heard about it—he'd surely, like always, laugh at me.

No.

It's possible—he might even get angry at me.

004

"Bad!"

"....."

Disregarding whether or not Oshino would get angry at my rigidness or not, Hanekawa quite clearly did get angry.

Bad!

She said, angrily.

And I was scolded like this despite being out of kindergarten... It occurred as soon as I had returned home from the park from earlier.

I had gotten a call from Hanekawa then.

At this point, I had been getting help with my studies from the two honor students, Senjougahara and Hanekawa, which was a circumstance I was extremely blessed to be in. However, Senjougahara was in charge of today, and since that had ended without any problems, there wouldn't be any reason for Hanekawa to give me a call—although, I didn't have the option of not answering a call from Hanekawa, to whom I owed a lot.

"Hello?"

I said when I picked up the phone.

"Ah, Araragi-kun? Sorry for calling at such a time—but there was something that I was curious about. Is it a good time?"

"Aah, it's all right, but..."

To be honest, I had been planning to shower and wash off all the dirt that got on me from playing in the sand, but I wasn't so obsessed with cleanliness so as to put Hanekawa off for later.

"A little while ago, I received a periodical report from Senjougahara-san..."

"Periodical report!? What do you mean by that!?"

It has such a terrifying ring to it!

Eh, so does she mean to say that Senjougahara, after having a study session with me, goes to report all of it to Hanekawa afterwards? Is she reporting to Hanekawa whether I'm properly studying or not?

Uwaah...

They really don't have any confidence in me, do they...

"Ah, no, to be specific, instead of this being a rehabilitation program for Araragi-kun, it's a rehabilitation program for Senjougahara-san—but anyway."

"...? Wait, is it really all right for you to just pass it off with an ‘anyway’?"

"So during that time, I just happened to hear about it, but Araragi-kun, I heard that you were going to investigate some sand in a park on your way back... Are you done with that already? I thought I’d try and time it so that I would call you once you were done."

"....."

Word travels fast, and your timing was perfect. And your actions are way too speedy! If it were up to me, I would wait until the day after to talk about the case—since we’d be meeting at school tomorrow anyway.

Well, honestly, I didn’t think this was important enough to speak to Hanekawa about it—but since she herself wanted to hear about it, I wasn’t reluctant to tell her.

And since I wasn’t Hachikuji, I obviously didn’t demand any payment from Hanekawa in exchange.

Thinking about the fact that normally there’d be some form of payment in exchange for them taking care of my studies, I really wasn’t doing enough for them in return.

I did a report of my investigation of the sandbox to Hanekawa.

Though I didn’t particularly dramatize it all, I did intentionally leave out the parts that were like, I went back to being a child again, or I wanted to slide down the slide. Well, leaving out that much shouldn’t become a problem.

But, whether or not I should or shouldn’t have hidden my childish state of mind, Hanekawa still got angry with me with a

"Bad!"

as if I was a child.

Rather than getting angry with me, she was more scolding me.

Who did she think I was...?

"Isn’t this a bit hopeless, Araragi-kun?"

"Eh...? I may be a bit hopeless, but you don’t have to go and say it outright like that. At least try to sugarcoat it a bit."

"No, I’m not saying that you yourself are hopeless, just that what you were doing was a bit hopeless..."

You have a bit of a persecution complex, don’t you, said Hanekawa.

Hm, well, I may have to agree.

Although it might be less of a persecution complex and more of an inferiority complex in this case.

"But what I was doing was hopeless? Well, in the first place, what are you curious about, anyway? Since you did say there was something on your mind..."

"Yes. But I had hoped that you would have resolved everything neatly, and I was planning on more of a follow-up report..."

"A follow-up report..."

Receiving reports from Senjougahara and me—what position are you supposed to be in, exactly?

A general, maybe?

"But what exactly did I do wrong? I tried doing as much as I could, you know? I assumed the worst and did a cautious examination, you know?"

"Yes, that may be. Making sand hills and playing around."

"....."

I don't think I said anything about that, though...

Does this mean that, somewhere in my 'report', there was enough evidence for her to be able to guess that?—but since she's able to say it with that much confidence, that must be the case.

To say it again, speaking with her is sca~ry.

I feel like I'm being seen through, though in a different angle than with Oshino.

"Hm. Hmm. Araragi-kun, you've forgotten something important. You're just looking at it too rigidly."

"Rigidly?"

"Whether the sandbox in question is the work of an oddity, or an artificial phenomenon—saying that it has to be one of the two is too rigid. Isn't it?"

"Well... I suppose it is... Eh? Are there other possibilities?"

In the first place, even though she only heard about it from Senjougahara, how is it that Hanekawa is able to talk about it as if she had directly seen the sand imitating a 'demon's face' on her own—not to mention, at the time Senjougahara had heard it from me, I myself hadn't directly seen the sand, and was still half doubting the information I bought from Hachikuji for fifty yen. So how did she have that much confidence?—is it the same reason as how she knew I had felt like I was a child again?

"There are other possibilities. A third possibility."

"Heh, so there is something like that... You really know everything, don't you?"

It was undeniable that the line I usually spoke with feelings of admiration was, this time around, spoken with a hint of sarcasm.

However, even towards an inferior, disgraceful human being like me, Hanekawa said,

"I don't know everything. I just know what I know."

She responded with the usual line.

So, ejecting all my maliciousness, I compose myself—this was simple enough even for me. I felt like I was completely in the palm of Hanekawa's hand.

This could be as a result of that rehabilitation program.

"The third option… If it's neither the work of an oddity nor an artificial phenomenon, then it would be… Um…"

At any rate, I tried speaking to Hanekawa with a calm and composed mind. Somehow, it felt like I was still studying for a test.

"Well, thinking about it properly… If I use process of elimination, then the only thing I can think of is it being a natural phenomenon… Because of the wind in the park, or the way the slide is positioned, it's just coincidentally easy to make that shape…"

Though I said whatever came to mind, even as I spoke I knew that it couldn't be the right answer.

Or rather, the natural phenomenon culprit theory seems like what would be thought of and then rejected first and foremost—it would be a different story if it was between two buildings, but an open space like that park without any obstructions couldn't possibly have the wind going in one way all the time.

Even if, say, it didn't show up like that every day, the days Hachikuji and I visited were absolutely random—so it's hard to think that the conditions just happened to be the same on both times.

So, I was already prepared for Hanekawa to curtly deny what I had said to take up some time.

Or possibly, she might go,

"Bad!"

and get angry again.

Or possibly, anticipating something like that, I intentionally proposed something stupid—though I wanted to believe that I wasn't so stupid—however, that faint hope would end as a swing and a miss.

"That's right, so you do understand, Araragi-kun! What, so there's no need for me to take the stage after all!"

"Eh…? No, wait a minute, don't just back out of it so quickly! You're still in the business of explaining to me what exactly that's supposed to mean!"

"What kind of a business is that…"

"Because, by a natural phenomenon… You'd be saying that because of how the wind blows or something, the sand coincidentally formed that shape on its own, but there's no way that's—"

As I said that.

I thought it went without saying—but there was no way that I knew something that Hanekawa didn't. Well, even this might be due to my inferiority complex…

Well, setting that aside.

Even if that 'demon's face' was the result of a natural phenomenon—even if I had carelessly and rigidly dismissed that possibility, if I had to say it, the more I thought about it the more peaceful of an 'answer' it was, but while I may have not realized it, there was no reason for Hanekawa to get angry at me…

To think that Hanekawa's rehabilitation program would be that strict—was it a Spartan education that didn't allow any carelessness?

But though I had those fears, it seems it was a misunderstanding on my part.

Hanekawa had gotten angry with me…

Because there was plenty of reason for her to do so.

"Listen here, Araragi-kun. Natural phenomena aren't only just wind and rain."

"Eh?"

005

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line.

After that, I returned to the park in order to confirm Hanekawa's 'answer'—and, as a matter of course, without any need to say it, Hanekawa's deduction was right on the mark.

"Hey, Araragi-kun. When you investigated the sandbox—er, that's describing it enthusiastically, but when you investigated it, you only looked at the sand, didn't you?"

She said.

"But the sandbox—is only a sandbox when you include the container."

The container of the sandbox?

I didn't get it as soon as I was told—and this was forcing me out the usual range of my thoughts, but the 'sand' in a 'sandbox' in terms of 'playground equipment' would, in a way different from beaches, be placed in some container like a pool so that it wouldn't be mixed with the dirt; the container would then be buried into the ground.

If you kept digging into the sandbox, you'd eventually reach the 'bottom'—but since the bottom ends up being deeper than you'd think, kids may think that there isn't any bottom, or that the sand is connected to the ground like usual.

Well, that's the typical construction of sandboxes, so if it's pointed out to me—or if I just think about it normally, then it's an easy story to get.

"That's why, Araragi-kun—if you're going to investigate the 'sandbox', you have to investigate the container as well, or you won't have investigated it properly. So—"

As she said that, Hanekawa used a rather strict tone of voice.

"When you think of sand, it's usually weighty."

As long as there's nothing unusual, that is.

She said that—and so, taking a shovel with me, I came to the sandbox in question and began digging a hole.

I hurriedly, but cautiously, dug a hole.

And, sure enough—after having dug about fifty centimeters in, I reached the bottom.

And there was—a large fissure through the bottom.

A fissure.

Through the bottom.

"....."

There was no need to think anymore.

Since the bottom of the container of the 'sandbox' had fissured—likely due to deterioration—and since it had fissured together with the weight of the sand that Hanekawa had mentioned, the answer was that the sand settled down to form a shape like that.

Water conforms to the shape of the container it's in, and sand does the same—though it does take longer to do so than water, and it doesn't clearly get into the shape of the container like water does.

So soon after kids play in the sandbox, and most likely soon after I had trampled down on the sand in my investigation, the sand didn't 'go back to its original state'—but after some time, it probably would have 'gone back to its original state'.

Almost as if the sand had a will of its own.

To project the form of the bottom of the container.

The fact that it was the form of a demon was, as expected, a coincidence—though I didn't know if it was the simulacrum phenomenon or whatever.

But just as Hanekawa had said—the degradation of the container and the weight of the sand were neither the work of an oddity nor the work of a human but a natural phenomenon; however, it wasn't completely peaceful.

More peaceful of an answer.

To say that was ridiculous.

A natural phenomenon that wasn't wind or rain.

It was a natural phenomenon up until now—and it would be a natural phenomenon from here on out.

Right now, it was only a natural phenomenon that would cause a strange design to appear on the surface of the sand, but if the fissures of the container continued to get bigger, the floor would soon break into pieces and the dirt would mix with the sand, which could make it possible for quicksand or liquefaction to occur—it probably wouldn't be a problem for adults, but because it's children that play in a sandbox, it could be potentially fatal.

Like a bottomless swamp.

You could be swallowed up.

That was the worst possible circumstance, and playing inside a fissured container was plenty dangerous—like a race against time.

That's why Hanekawa got angry with me.

"For the time being… Should I call the company that manages the park?"

Wait, but was it the local governement and not a company that managed the park…? Well, if I asked Hanekawa, who knew everything, she would probably tell me.

And with that, the case was finally closed.

"However…"

Looking at the hole I dug, I thought.

"Certainly—it was a really misdirected dispute, wasn't it? Whether humans are scarier than oddities, or oddities are scarier than humans—that really was a misdirected dispute."

The scarier one, and the one that wasn't peaceful at all, was neither an oddity nor a human, but nature.



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
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7
July

Koyomi Water

001

As far as Kanbaru Suruga is concerned, she surely believes that roads are not for walking but for running—that junior of mine has made it a principle to always be sprinting with all her strength no matter what road she's on, no matter the circumstances, regardless of the weather or wind direction, and she doesn't seem to be very good at lowering her pace or taking it easy.

That's right, she's not very good at it.

It's her weak point.

Even though she's always running at full speed, her quick pace is actually not particularly her specialty; it's only that moving at a slow pace is hard for her to the point that it may be unreachable—to the point I could even say that I couldn't do anything about it.

And in that sense, Kanbaru, who has never been afraid of making any wasted movements, has probably never thought about walking slowly in the first place—on a road.

Not a road to walk on, but a road to run on.

Starting from when she had gotten the attention of the entire school and was even called a star—and even now, after she retired from the basketball club, she had never lost her radiance. She's definitely holding onto a roadmap with a route that's completely different from mine.

"Hm. The road, so to speak, may actually be something different, then, Araragi-senpai—
"

One day, when I spoke to her about it, Kanbaru responded to me with that. As always, she looked straight towards me as she responded.

"For people like me, who run as part of their daily lives, the place they run on is not a road but a course."

A course?

I suppose in track-and-field events, the 'roads' that the runners run on can be considered those—but for people like me, who don't run as part of their daily lives, and consider running as a huge event, thinking of a 'road' as a 'course' can only seem unstable.

How should I say it?

When you think of a course, there's a strong impression that it's something that's fixed, with absolute rules that don't allow any straying from the path.

"What are you saying? That doesn't seem like Araragi-senpai at all. It's 'roads', normally, that are fixed and don't allow any straying, right? If you move to another lane, it'll definitely cause an accident. It's not easy to change lanes no matter what road you're on."

That's true.

If you call it a 'road' or a 'course', there's really only a difference due to the context, and in the end there's really only a problem of language.

Effectively, whether you run or you walk.

Whether it's a road or a course, the road is a road.

There's something like 'leading a life of running on the rails', but on top of the fact that everybody moves on the roads of life, you have to abide by the rules of some kind that are set in place.

You have to abide by the road traffic laws of some kind.

Dropping out is impossible—you can't stray from the roads with rules set on them. Though lane changing is possible, but in the worst case, if you stray out of the lane, you might fall off a cliff.

And if not that, a head-on collision might occur.

So in the end, there's no choice but to proceed on the roads.

"However, well, even if you say that, it's not actually difficult to drop out—because you can drop out even if you don't stray out of the lane. Sprinting along the road, or the course, with all your strength can be considered 'proceeding', but it's not always limited to 'proceeding forward'—because people are capable of 'proceeding backwards' as well."

Because they can.

Said Kanbaru.

"Because roads can also be escape routes."

002

"Kanbaru, you bastard. It seems you haven't been listening to what I've been saying."

"What? Araragi-senpai, if you suddenly call your junior 'you bastard' then her heart can't help but beat fast, but it's unexpected for me to be under such suspicion. To think that I, the subject of this conversation, Kanbaru Suruga, who respects the world's greatest Araragi-senpai, would not be listening to what he's saying; something like that is impossible. It's a fantasy! Please understand, Araragi-senpai. Uttering such careless words: how much were you planning on confusing the minds of humans everywhere?"

"There's no way I could confuse even a single mind with my words. And you're not suddenly going to be come the subject of the conversation with just that. Anyway,

Kanbaru. Since I know that you weren't listening to me, being the good senior that I am, I'll say it once more. I'll repeat myself just for you."

A certain day in July.

On my day off I decided to visit the Kanbaru household—and was standing in the hallway of that Japanese house. To be exact, I had no choice but to stand in the hallway, almost as if I was being punished for being late to school.

Of course, I wasn't late at all.

I had come to the Kanbaru household on time, the time we had planned.

But even so, the reason I had to stand in the hallway was because I was unable to enter the room that I had been brought to—in other words, to be exact, I wasn't just standing in the hallway: I was stuck in the hallway.

"All right, Kanbaru? Listen to me properly."

"I would've listened even if you didn't tell me to. I've never missed a single word from Araragi-senpai, when the words that come out of his mouth are always wise. Rather, I'm worried that if I listen any more than this, I'll be so overcome with emotion that I'll faint."

"...I was just saying that you should take me to your room."

For the time being, I disregarded the usual, tedious flattery that she aimed towards her seniors, and pointed at her room.

Inside the room, with her paper sliding door open.

"I didn't tell you to take me to your storehouse."

Inside the room.

It wasn't chaotic or anything—to make it easy to understand, it wasn't horizontally, but vertically chaotic. No, like I said, it wasn't chaotic—it had just all accumulated. Not in terms of the area of the room, but the capacity of the room was bordering on chaos...

"A storehouse? That's a bit rude. Even if you are Araragi-senpai, there are good things and bad things to say."

Kanbaru grins widely.

"Well, that was a good thing, though."

"Are you really okay with your room being called a storehouse, then..."

Well, to be honest, I had shown some restraint when I said that—if I had stated my honest thoughts, then instead of a storehouse, I would've called it the place she kept her non-combustible waste.

I was almost in admiration that Kanbaru's house had its own place for its non-combustibles.

Or it could almost be a scrapyard—scraps of iron had accumulated, forming some sort of overbearing tower, so to speak...

It was maintaining a miraculous balance, and the situation inside the room made for one big spectacle; however, if I dared to stomp my foot where I was, it was possible for a small avalanche to make its way out of the room—and that was why I was stuck in the hallway, unable to move.

"....."

Kanbaru Suruga.

It was towards the end of May when I happened to meet the past ace of the basketball club, Naoetsu High second-year Kanbaru Suruga—she was an acquaintance of Senjoughara's from middle school, and with that, we became friends.

However, despite it being so simple to describe, the truth was our relationship wasn't so simple—adding this might divert the story a bit, but like me, or perhaps in a way more than me, she was a person affected by an oddity—and the traces of that remained in her left arm.

And she wrapped it up in bandages.

Wrapping it up—and concealing it.

But nonetheless, if you exclude those various things and think about it, or rather if you include them and think about it, from my point of view, Kanbaru Suruga was a cute junior of mine. Although, it may be impudent of me, a dunce with no redeeming features, to call the athlete that was once the superstar of the basketball club 'cute'...

However, if you take away the point about her being an amazing athlete, I can't deny the fact that she becomes only a self-indulgent, or rather, a very slovenly girl.

For an example, that Kanbaru Suruga was a 'girl that couldn't tidy up'—or, rather, to put it more frankly, an 'untidy girl'.

An untidy chaos girl.

If you wanted to know why I was so shocked, it would be because when I had first come to her room, I had promised Kanbaru that I would make an earnest effort to tidy up her room when I had the chance—and now, when that chance came and I had come to tidy up, even though not a lot of time had passed, I couldn't even see the ceiling anymore.

And even though I was pretty good at tiding things up and keeping things in order—or rather, I can't settle down unless things are tidied up—I honestly had no idea where to even begin.

I was completely at a loss as to how I was going to fix this situation—and the garbage bags I brought from home seemed strangely useless.

Ten forty-five-liter bags.

What could I possibly do with only those? ...There was no way they could do anything. What I needed weren't garbage bags, but cardboard boxes. Although, if it's cardboard boxes, I bet I'd be able to find some in this storehouse-like room.

"Kukuku. Well, I wonder how on earth Araragi-senpai plans to tidy up this room? Why don't you show me what you've got."

"Why are you suddenly looking down on me?"

"Looking down? No, no. I'm actually looking up to you. From underground."

"That's scary! If I heard a voice from underground telling me to show what I've got… The story would progress to a completely new stage. Anyway, you didn't do anything like filling up this room with junk from other rooms just to harass me, knowing I'd be coming to tidy up, did you?"

That was one method people used to clean their homes.

By putting all unnecessary things into a single room, you can make the other rooms cleaner one room at a time—eventually you'd end up working twice as much, and it feels very inefficient, but the difficulty of cleaning does get lower.

"What are you saying? You are casting unfounded suspicions on me. Although, if it's Araragi-senpai who casts them, I'm happy whether they're words of praise or suspicion!"

"I'm not praising you at all!"

"This is my only room. Since I was a child, I wasn't raised with the luxury of being given two or three rooms, you see. This is the only room I have."

"Is that so… Then that's good."

"That's right. It's like how Araragi-senpai is the only senior I have."

"That's harsh!"

What happened to Senjougahara!"

Don't call someone you met only two months ago the only senior you have… And I haven't even done anything to make you respect me that much, and I probably won't in the future either.

"But, it's a bit strange… or rather, it's kind of unreasonable. If your roome is like this, where in the world do you sleep?"

"What do you mean? I sleep in here."

She tilted her head as if she was going, "Huh?"

"The places where I sleep would be only these: in this room, in Senjougahara-senpai's lap, and using Araragi-senpai's arms as a pillow."

"I'll disregard what you said about Senjougahara's lap, but you've never slept on my arms, and I can't possibly see you sleeping in this room… In the first place you can't even enter!"

"But that's only Araragi-senpai's amateurish opinion, isn't it?"

Kanbaru unconcernedly says something rude about the senior she respects so much—I'd like to learn from her her insensitivity, even as her senior.

Well, I'd like to hear the basis for why my opinion is amateurish. Although I certainly wasn't a specialist—in anything, really.

"All right, Kanbaru, show me. How exactly do you manage to sleep in this room?"

It's said that the universal genius Leonardo da Vinci was able to sleep while standing up—was Kanbaru doing something similar to that? Well, at least in regards to sports, Kanbaru has the qualifications to be called a genius… Although it seemed to be impossible to sleep in this room even while standing up.

"Huhuhu. I really have lived a long life, huh? To think that the day would come when I would be the one teaching Araragi-senpai something."

"You're only seventeen years old, and it hasn't even been a hundred days since we met…"

What am I, doomed after my hundredth day?

"Don't act so self-important and just show me. How do you sleep? I'll send you flying if the punch line is that you sleep in the hallway or something!"

"If you tell me that then I do want to end with a punch line like that. It'd be nice to be sent flying by Araragi-senpai. Instead of being kabe-don (wall-slammed), I'd like to be rouka-don (hall-slammed)!"

"Rouka-don?"

Though she had already lost me at "kabe-don".

It's kind of amazing.

We had been speaking for quite a while now, but I hadn't been able to enter Kanbaru's room since I had come to her house.

At things rate, things are going to end at just the opening talk.

"Is this don (rice with toppings) some sort of special menu? Like it's topped with eggs cooked with hallways?"

"Hm. Well, I suppose there may exist hallways that you'd want to cook and put on rice… Er, we were talking about how I slept, right? See, Araragi-senpai. Look over there! There's an opening there, right?"

Kanbaru pointed inside the room.

There was indeed an opening there, but it seemed more like a cave dug into the side of a steep cliff… It was almost like an air spot had arisen in an exquisitely balanced pile of baggage.

"Aah. So, what about it? Don't tell me that you're managing to sleep in that hole like some sort of mole!"

"That's exactly right! With a dash from the hallway and a Fosbury flop, I can jump right in there."

And as if that was something to boast about, Kanbaru proudly stuck out her chest. And with the way you'd bend backward for a Fosbury flop… For a place that wasn't even a mattress or a sand pit, jumping in like that made it seem like you'd receive such serious injuries that you'd need hemostasis to stop the bleeding.

There’s no need to do all that to sleep in your room!

Just sleep in the hallway!

Really now.

"Well, you see, Araragi-senpai. The fact that you make fast conclusions is a good point of your, but in some cases, you’re going to err in judgment."

"I don’t want to take advice from you. The only error in judgment I made was promising to clean up this room without thinking about it! Huh? Is it actually comfortable to sleep in? That cave."

"It is!"

"Even if you don’t get hurt, it’s bad for your sleeping position, isn’t it? When you wake up, your body will be all sore and stiff. Kanbaru, you might not know this, but sleeping is an activity of life performed to rest your mind and body, all right?"

"I know that. Actually, though I wouldn’t say it’s cushiony, that position is actually a perfect fit for my body, so it’s actually pretty comfortable!"

"Is that so…"

"I wouldn’t say it’s as good as sleeping in Senjougahara-senpai’s lap, but it’s at least more comfortable than Araragi-senpai’s arms."

"Hold on a second! I know you’re trying to get me to retort by saying that I’ve never once let you use my arms as a pillow, but I’m not going to hide my rage if you’re going to say that my arms are less comfortable than that pile of trash!"

"Oy, oy, Araragi-senpai, there’s no need to roll up your sleeves and get so angry! No need to bare your arms on the subject of sleeping on your arms!"

"Don’t say something so stupid with such a happy expression!"

Not to mention I wasn’t even rolling my sleeves up.

In the first place, it was July, the middle of summer, and with my short sleeves, I didn’t have sleeves to roll up.

"Now, now, what I said may have been too much.

"You haven’t said anything that wasn’t too much! Everything you’ve said was too much! What was it? What did you say too much on?"

"Well, it’s still true that the pile of trash is more comfortable to sleep on than Araragi-senpai’s arms, however."

"……"

So she’s not going to take that back.

For a pile of trash to be recognized above me…

"However, it’s often said that the strong points and weak points are two sides of the same coin. Though that cave makes a perfect fit for my body, it’s impossible to sleep with anyone else!"

Kanbaru said this in a rather longing way.

In two meanings of the word longing.

"If I could sleep in that cave with Araragi-senpai, then at that very moment, it would surpass Senjougahara-senpai's lap and would be the completion of the perfect bed!"

"Shut up!"

"By the way, I'm a bit late in pointing this out, but you said that sleeping is an activity of life performed to rest your mind and body, but "sleeping" in terms of an activity of life would be—"

"Dirty jokes are forbidden—!"

Finishing up with that cheerful exchange.

Finally, after waiting so long—or rather, after overcoming all difficulties, I began to clean Kanbaru Suruga's room.

003

Thinking about it, when I first came to Kanbaru's room, even though I was light on my feet, I still had to clean up a little—because if I didn't, there wouldn't have been any place to stand.

At that time, it seemed like I'd get hurt if I walked around with bare feet—as if I was walking through a minefield. Even though I'm a guy, I'm pretty bad with chaotic situations whether they're rooms or in my mind, but anyone's cleaning impulses would be called forth after being shown a room like that.

Well, anyway, if you asked me what I wanted to say, then I guess it would be that thinking that it wouldn't be much work today since I had done some preliminary work the month before last was a huge underestimation.

But even so, if the reason for it becoming this terrible in only a month or so wasn't an attempt to harass me or some display of skill, the possibility was high that Kanbaru's dependency was showing, with her thinking, 'it'll be all right because Araragi-senpai is coming to clean it up'.

So as an upperclassman—as a senior that should point his juniors in the right direction—it's possible that the right course for a person would be to not go to work in Kanbaru's room, but instead turn around and go back home. But it was also true that people don't always make the right decisions like that.

After all, it's harder to stop in the middle of doing something than it is to start it.

And I also didn't want to disappoint Kanbaru, but even before that, I just couldn't turn my eyes away from the fact that she was sleeping in that cellar-like place in that heap of garbage. And of course, like the month before last, my cleaning impulses were simply stimulated by the overwhelmingness of the state of the room.

I did falter, but returning now would dishonor the name of Araragi Koyomi.

The time spent cleaning went on for a few hours—despite starting in the afternoon, without exaggerating, cleaning continued until nighttime, but finally it felt like progress was being made.

"To put it clearly, instead of cleaning up, it feels like it would be faster if we just blew it up…"

"Hahaha, Araragi-senpai. Please forgo the explosions this time. Everything is made of wood, so the whole residence will be blown away without a trace!"

Kanbaru laughed cheerfully.

What's she laughing for?

By the way, she didn't lift a finger to help with the cleaning—the only thing she did was stay off to the side and verbally indicate what she needed and what she didn't need.

If anyone had been watching these past few hours with me and Kanbaru, they surely would have thought that she was senior to me—and I was the junior that came to help my senior with moving.

Not to mention, a junior that came to help because of a rather compelling force.

"I would think your grandparents would authorize a bombing if it was for the sake of getting your room clean."

"You don't understand, do you? How valuable do you think those books are?"

"Then let's toss these books out first!"

Well, tossing them out or not, since today was a holiday, there wasn't going to be any garbage collection, so the unnecessary stuff was just tied up and left in the yard—at best, we could only hope that it wouldn't rain until garbage collection day.

She could've at least helped me take the trash out… At this rate, I'm just singlehandedly interfering into another home's affairs!

"Anyway… Good work, Kanbaru."

I said.

Honestly, I was the one that did all the work, but I couldn't think of anything else to say. Saying something like "We did it!" seemed a bit off…

Besides, constantly watching someone work from off to the side can be tiring in itself, so I'll think of it favorably for her.

Come to think of it, I'd hate it if someone else came to clean my room… Although in Kanbaru's case, she's probably thrilled about it.

I really don't get her.

What kind of person is she, really?

"Well, I'll be going now. It's gotten really late, huh—there's no point in staying any longer."

"Oy, oy, hold it right there, Araragi-senpai!"

"Hold on, no matter what, saying an expression like that to your senior is kind of wrong!"

It's kind of hard to tell since she chatters on so cheerfully, but, listening closely, she never uses respectful language to her seniors, does she.

"Did you think that, after Araragi-senpai, who I hold in the highest esteem, cleans my room for me, I would send him off without doing anything?"

"Without doing anything… Were you planning on doing something to me!?"

"Er, there's no need to be so cautious…"

Who do you think I am, says Kanbaru with a disgruntled look.

Well, even if you're disgruntled.

Cautiousness was the only thing I came with.

"I thought I'd at least make some tea. No, tea won't do. I should at least prepare a meal for Araragi-senpai."

"A meal…? Oh, you mean dinner? No, it's all right. I'll have to say no to that. I can just eat whatever's left over for me when I get home, anyway."

"That won't do. I will not allow you to refuse."

"Huh? Was refusing something that you needed to be allowed to do by someone? Particularly by your junior?"

"You won't be allowed out of this house until you have some of my grandmother's home-cooked meal!"

"You're threatening me now!?"

And your grandmother's the one making it?

So when she said she'd prepare a meal, it wasn't that she herself was going to make it… Well, no matter how favorable a light I try to see her in, Kanbaru doesn't seem like the kind of person that can cook.

That stack of food boxes from before was done by her grandmother, too.

Though they're both domestic chores, cooking ability and cleaning ability don't have to be related, but a person who's good at cooking probably wouldn't be okay with leaving their room in such a disastrous state.

Since if the entire house was messy, it would be the end if the kitchen started getting messy, too…

"Huhu. Were you thinking of running away at full force? Just try it. However, do you think you can win against me with only your wit?"

Kanbaru spread out her arms and stood on the threshold of her room.

It was just like a defense position in basketball, but this girl, she really didn't know her manners in a Japanese household…

"Now, come at me! I may have retired, but my defense isn't so weak as to let the amateurish Araragi-senpai through!"

"No, but I'm not going to come at you..."

At any rate, instead of respecting me, she was looking down on me as an amateur.

Things would be different if I let Shinobu drink my blood and change into a vampire, but since I wasn't in that state, there was no way I would be able to break through Kanbaru's defense.

I guess I had to obediently listen to her.

Well, I wouldn't be acting as a senior if I refused the kindness of a junior... or rather, her feelings of gratitude.

Although to be honest, since I had consistently not been in any clubs since middle school, I was really inexperienced with being treated as somebody's senior, so I didn't really know what the proper behavior was for a senior to take... So I didn't know the distance I should take with Kanbaru.

I guess I'll ask Senjougahara about it later.

Is it all right if you spend your holiday to go and clean your junior's room, and then have dinner that that junior feeds you out of gratitude...

Well, being who she is, since she dotes on Kanbaru so much, I can't really expect an honest answer to that...

"All right, all right, Kanbaru. It's my loss, I give up."

"Nope, you can't escape this fight that easily, Araragi-senpai! There's still an opening, so it's too early to give up now!"

"What exactly do you want me to do!?"

"What I want is for you to take me on and wrestle with me!"

"So it wasn't basketball but sumo..."

It would be a disgrace if I lost at sumo to a girl, not to mention a junior, so I decided to welcome Kanbaru's encouragement.

"All right, then, I'll let you treat me to dinner,"

I said.

"Since I'm going to make a phone call home to tell them."

"Mm. Well, if Araragi-senpai is going to say that then it can't be helped."

Kanbaru responded coolly, for some reason.

In any case, disregarding the fact that we weren't able to wrestle, it seemed she was content with carrying me around as she pleased—well, since it seemed that my junior spent a productive holiday, even I was happy.

But, putting that aside.

"Now then, Araragi-senpai. Before we go for dinner."

"Hm?"

"Please take a bath. It would be annoying if you ate dinner looking that dirty."

004

I knew that it wasn't correct to call the room that you ate in, in Japanese houses, the 'dining room', but as I didn't know what it was supposed to be called, I decided not to point it out.

Well, regardless of senior-junior relations, Kanbaru was right in that it would be terrible manners to show up to eat after being covered in dirt and grime from cleaning, so I should be thankful to her for pointing it out.

I had nearly acted indelicately in someone else's home—nevertheless, I didn't possibly think that I would be borrowing the bath of that someone else's home, so I couldn't be more hesitant in entering the bath.

Hesitant, or rather…

Indecent, maybe?

I felt like I was doing something that I really shouldn't have been doing… As a bath made from Japanese cypress, it was a fine bath suitable for a fine estate. It was a bath that wouldn't look strange if it were in a Japanese inn, and I could think that being able to enter such a bath was plenty of compensation for today's manual labor.

"……"

No, but it was still weird.

To bathe leisurely up to my shoulders at the house of the junior with whom I have not deeply associated was…

For example, I can expect that even Senjougahara, whose common sense seemed to deviate slightly from the norm, probably would not have done something like this.

Or rather if I talked to her about it I'd probably be killed.

Killed with her stationery.

Erased with an eraseable ballpoint pen—although, I wasn't exactly sure how she'd manage to do that.

I looked at the bathroom clock that didn't go with the cypress bath—or rather, the clock reminded me that this wasn't a Japanese inn but a private home. Rather than being curious about what time it was, I was more concerned with how much time was left until the 'meal' that Kanbaru had spoken of.

It was more likely that Kanbaru, instead of preparing a dinner party to entertain me from the beginning, had instead only just thought of it at that moment, and gained approval from her grandmother after the fact.

I must certainly be a bother to her grandmother, who was suddenly made to prepare my part as well—she was probably thinking I was being a rather arrogant upperclassman—but she was a good person to consent to it.

I was grateful. Or rather, I felt very sorry.

"...but I just can't calm down."

Stuff like the bathtub that I could stretch my legs in or the water that was at the perfect temperature were nice, and I had no intention of withdrawing what I said before about it being good compensation for my manual labor, but I just couldn't calm down about using another home's shampoo or conditioner or soap.

In the end, I guess I'm just intolerant.

Well.

I'll just warm myself up and then get out afterwards—just as I thought that, I heard a sound from just outside.

Or, rather than a sound, I heard a voice.

"Hm! What's this! The door won't open! It's locked! Are you all right, Araragi-senpai! I'll come help you out!"

"....."

It seemed she was violently trying to force open the door—it seemed some hoodlum was attempting to invade the bathroom.

"Open this door immediately! Come out with your hands above your head! This is an order!"

"....."

So it wasn't a hoodlum but the police.

"I am Kanbaru Suruga! Araragi-senpai's sex slave—my specialty is the Wall Jump!"

"....."

So it was a hoodlum after all.

"Eeh, why won't it open... I guess I have no choice, I'll go get those sticks that the riot police use when they break in!"

"Stop it! And don't go and bring things you don't know the name of!"

Well.

I didn't know the name either.

"Ah, Araragi-kun. So you're safe..."

After hearing me retort, the sound of the door being violently struck finally stopped. It appears that she was actually thinking about my safety—but nonetheless, I couldn't excuse the fact that she had tried to invade the bathroom.

I yelled from inside the bath.

Though the echoes made it weird for the people inside, it was necessary to use a loud voice in order to hold a conversation through the sheets of paper that separated the bathroom.

As for Kanbaru, her voice was normally loud, so it was enough to reach the bath.

"That really surprised me… I thought Araragi-senpai had been confined, so I was really worried."

"There's only one person in this world that would want to confine me, and that would be you!"

"Ha ha ha. No matter how Senjougahara I am, there's no way I would do something like that. But I Wonder why the door won't open?"

"That's obviously because it's locked!"

I had pretended to be surprised, or rather I was actually surprised, but I had thought that, knowing Kanbaru, it was possible for her to suddenly invade while I was bathing.

Locking the door was a natural precaution.

"Locked…? Was there even a lock on the door of the bathroom?"

It seemed Kanbaru was seriously surprised at this.

Even though this is your own house's bathroom, why don't you know something like that?

"Well, you know, whenever I take a bath, I just leave the door open…"

"Rather than leaving it open, you're just openly displaying yourself… Well, you're basically free to do what you want in your own home."

Or rather.

I was the one naked in someone else's home, even if I was taking a bath.

"Um, if you're misunderstanding something then I'd like to correct it, but Araragi-senpai. The reason I came was to enter the bath together with you, you know?"

"Then I'm not misunderstanding. No need to correct me."

"Sorry, that was wrong. I just thought I'd wash your clothes while you were bathing. I had no shameful thoughts whatsoever."

"……"

You're full of shameful thoughts, though!

And even if that were the truth, I had no confidence in your skill in washing clothes, when you're the one who made the room that made my clothes dirty while I cleaned it… You might even be worse at it than cooking.

"What are you saying? I've been doing it all this time in my sports-related club activities, you know. You could even say laundry is my field of expertise!"

"Mm… Well, if you say that, then it might be so? But, even so, if you go and wash my clothes, I'll have nothing to wear."

"Isn't it all right if you just come out naked?"

"There's no way that's all right! I don't have that much confidence in my naked body!"

"If you'd like, on top of your clothes, I can wash your body for you, too! From the front and the back!"

"……"

Her pervertedness was standing out even when sound-only, this girl. Since I was nude at the time, the sense of danger I could feel in my skin was double.

"As thanks for making my room nice and clean, I'm saying I'd like to make your body nice and clean, Araragi-senpai!"

"Clean up your own mind first! Even though you use such a nice bath every day, you have such a dirty mind!"

"Huhu. When you say that it is a nice bath, I cannot help but say that it is so. If I act humbly here, it might seem sarcastic."

She only hears words of praise.

I can picture that boastful smile in my head.

Well, it really was a nice bath that would make you want to boast…

"But it's not just the bath; the water is nice, too. We boil the water drawn from the well in our yard. It's not hot springs water, but it's deep something water with lots of something-sium."

"What the hell is deep something water with lots of something-sium… If you're going to boast then remember it properly!"

Is it like mineral water?

No, well water wasn't necessarily mineral water—well, hearing that, I felt like the water that filled this cypress bath was something special and mysterious.

Hmm.

Well water, huh.

"Ah, speaking of which, Araragi-senpai."

"What is it, Kanbaru-kouhai."

"That well water actually has a past, you know?"

"It's a pest? Oi oi, the one who's a pest is you, you hear?"

"Not a pest, a past."

"Oho?"

Well, it still seemed like you'd have a past, either way—but the well water has a past? What's that supposed to mean. Well water is something you can draw, not something with a past drawn on it…

"What kind of a past are you talking about?"

"Oh, so you're interested, are you?"

"Er, rather than interested…"

It's just that if you start a conversation like that, then I have no choice but to respond like this… But I did want to hear a little about whatever origin the water that I was in had.

It was a simple curiosity.

"Well, I guess I am. Interested. In whatever past it has. By the way, the way you're leaving me hanging is kind of annoying."

"It's a story about my father, you see."

"Oh, your fath…"

…er, you say?

Since Kanbaru had said that so casually, I had ended up responding just as casually, but Kanbaru's dad had passed away so many years ago—and it wasn't just her dad, but her mom as well.

In—a traffic accident.

And so Kanbaru was now living with her grandparents. Her grandparents' only son was Kanbaru's dad.

"……"

"My father, naturally, also used this bath—well, not just the bath, but the well water, too. On a regular basis."

Kanbaru continued to speak about her dad while I sat quietly, not knowing how to respond.

From her point of view, it's likely that she's already accepted her dad's passing as part of life—if that was the case, it might be ruder to be overly cautious about it, and it might be hard for Kanbaru to be cautious about it.

So I said,

"Hmm… On a regular basis, huh."

and responded to Kanbaru.

"Right. Well, from my father's point of view, it was water he used all the time, so he didn't particularly feel grateful towards it or anything…"

"Well, that makes sense…"

Seeing it through the eyes of someone like me who lived in an ordinary home, having a well in itself was enviable—and though I didn't say that much, I did think living like that was amazing, but if a well was in your yard since you were born, it makes sense for it to be 'something that's there' rather than 'something to be grateful for'.

"However, when he was young—when he took a bath, it seems that on extremely rare occasions there was something he would be concerned about."

"Concerned about?"

"He was concerned about a phenomenon—I guess you could call it that."

Related to oddities?

Well, it might not go that far—but it seems there was a mysterious phenomenon.

Kanbaru said.

"It might not go as far as oddity-related—a mysterious phenomenon…? That's surprisingly detailed, almost frighteningly so."

I braced myself a little in the bath.

If this well water were entangled with oddities, that would be a very big deal—even if you ignore how I was actually in the water at the moment, the fact that this water with a 'past' was used regularly could turn into something bad.

"No, that's why it doesn't go as far as oddity-related. In other words, it's not entangled with any oddities."

"Hah…"

Not oddity-related, not entangled with oddities?

A mysterious phenomenon not entangled with oddities—well, those can happen at any time.

Like, the work of a human.

Or perhaps, a natural phenomenon.

Things like that can happen any time—the problem is, how dangerous something like that could be.

In other words, saying that it's not related to oddities does not guarantee the safety of what Kanbaru's talking about.

"Eh, but, that monkey oddity that you wished on, wasn't that something your parents left behind?—no, that was your mom, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, that's right. That's Araragi-senpai for you, he has an outrageous memory!"

"Um, since I had nearly gotten it wrong in the beginning, being praised afterwards rather feels worse…"

"A long time ago, I used to pronounce 'outrageous' as 'out-rag-eous'!"

"That's even more outrageous."

Gaen Tooe.

That was her name, from what I could recall with my non-outrageous memory—she was Kanbaru Suruga's late mother.

I don't think I heard her father's name… Well, it would be a bit hard to ask for it with this timing.

"And, so, what was that mysterious phenomenon that had nothing to do with oddities? What about it, Kanbaru? If it's something bad, I'm going to have to get out the bath as fast as I can…"

"Such caution is unnecessary, Araragi-senpai. No need to worry, it's not anything scary. It's not a ghost story or anything."

"Not a ghost story—"

That didn't make me any more relieved.

At any rate, the influence of an oddity still remained in my body—if this well water temporarily, at erratic intervals, became holy water, then my body could very well melt.

Well, Kanbaru was the same with an oddity left in her body, and if she was using this bath without any problems, then I shouldn't have any reason to worry—but I wonder, since Kanbaru is a masochist, she might actually enjoy the pain that comes from her body melting a little.

"……"

Even if she was an extreme masochist, that would be a crazy reason.

What kind of oddity would she be?

The definition of odd, really.

She'd be 'suspicious!'

"Well, I won't stop you if you want to come out. And I won't stop you if you want to come out of the bathroom while naked.

"Stop me for that!"

"But, before that, Araragi-senpai. Please look at the surface of the water in that bathtub."

"?"

Though I didn't understand her reasons, I reflexively did as Kanbaru told me to—although, since my body was nearly submerged in the water, the water was already in my field of vision when I sat normally, without needing to pay close attention to it.

"I'm looking at it. It might be too late now… But is there something about this water?"

"No, it's not the water."

"It's not water? Eh? Do you mean to say it's hot water (お湯)? Well, it may be hot, but—"

"No, no, I don’t mean that. I said it clearly, didn’t I? It’s not the water I wanted you to look at."

It’s the surface of the water—she said.

Kanbaru said.

The surface?

005

I was considerably surprised when I learned about this, but—there is apparently no concept of ‘hot water (お湯)’ in English. Well, it’s not that there’s no concept, but that there’s just no word for it—hot water (お湯) and water are simply differentiated as ‘hot water’ and ‘cold water’, and lump them together as fundamentally the same thing.

As I was raised surrounded by Japanese culture, it would be impossible for me to consider that the word ‘hot water (お湯)’ did not exist, but from the point of view of those overseas, the ambiguity of the word ‘water’ in Japan might be stranger—the ambiguity of how ‘hot water’ and ‘water’ are differentiated, even though ‘hot water’ is also ‘water’—’water’ can be H2O, but it can also be an all-rounder term to describe all liquids.

Well, thinking about it like that, it’s not so strange as it is awkward.

In any case, the perpetrator who told me about the awkwardness of ‘water’ was Senjougahara Hitagi-sama.

"Die."

She said.

"Die. Die. Die. Die. Die. Die. Die."

"....."

Scary.

Whether she was sound-only or face-to-face, she was just scary in general... Since she was at the critical point from the beginning, she won’t get any worse.

Though I had nearly dropped my cell phone, I somehow put up with it.

"I-I’m not going to die just yet."

I said.

"I’ve only just become your boyfriend. We’ve only just started going out. I want to go on more dates with you. Life is way too precious to die right now!"

"Oh my. You’re saying some really pleasant things, aren’t you. Then, you don’t have to die."

"....."

Senjougahara-san, you're too simple.

You can tell me to die a little more from that.

In other words, don't go baring your murderous intent towards me if you're going to withdraw it so easily—but anyway.

"Well, so in that sense, I went to Kanbaru's house today to clean."

I said, bringing the conversation back.

In the end, after that, I left the bath, participated in Kanbaru's appreciation—that is, the dinner party that was held—and when I had finished eating it had gotten rather late, so it seemed they had been about to prepare a futon, and I had somehow been able to politely refuse them—and somehow, before the hour hand of my watch hit the top, I managed to return home.

I ended up being lectured by my little sisters on walking around so late at night.

Normally when lectured by my sisters, from then a scene of carnage would unfold from our blood feud, but to the good fortune of my sisters, I was completely tired.

The fatigue from cleaning Kanbaru's room had already been washed away while borrowing the bath, but my anxiety from the dinner party afterwards had left me exhausted.

That's why I ignored my sisters and went to bed—and I had planned on going to sleep just like that.

But, when I went to connect my cell phone to its charger, I found out that a message had been sent to me without me noticing.

It was Senjougahara's message.

I could ignore my sisters, but I couldn't ignore Senjougahara's message. Since she's scary—but on top of that, the month before last, Senjougahara and I had begun a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, so I shouldn't be ignoring her with that in mind.

I thought it would be a good night message considering the time, but after looking at the subject that read, 'I hear you went to Kanbaru's room', it seemed to be an observation message.

There was nothing in the body of the message.

Even the way she uses messages are scary...

It may very well have been a 'good night for eternity' message.

And so I was the one who called Senjougahara, reporting the details of today—no lies included.

After all, it's scary when she unveils my lies, and because of Kanbaru and Senjougahara's Reborn Valhalla Combination linked by some mental hotline, information manages to travel insanely fast, so my lies would absolutely be unveiled. They might even be the Unveilhalla Combination at that.

I'm completely dominated.

No, rather than saying I'm dominated, it felt more like I was being trodden on—between being treated as an arm pillow by Kanbaru and being treated as a doormat by Senjougahara, my dignity was in a pitiful state.

Instead of dignity, it was more like digging myself into a hole.

At this point I was about to go and ask Hanekawa for help, but if Senjougahara was responsible for observing my private life, then the one managing it was Hanekawa, so whether I asked her for help or not, the fact that she wasn't already helping me out indicated that she had no intention of helping me otherwise.

Although I hadn't told Senjougahara about going over to Kanbaru's house to clean (that's why she got a report from Kanbaru), I did tell Hanekawa about it beforehand—er, wait a minute.

What's going on with my life, now, really!?

I have no free will at all!

If it's like this, I start to question whether the decision I made to study earnestly to go to the same college as Senjougahara was really out of my own volition.

"To go and clean the room of an underclassman, you really do take good care of them—although going and taking a bath there is rather impudent. I think you should die."

"Don't think that!"

"It's fine as long as I don't think about killing you, right?"

"....."

I guess that's fine.

"So, Araragi-kun. What did you think of what Kanbaru said?"

"Hm?"

"About—how you were told look not at the water, but its surface."

"Ah..."

I nodded.

Since I was telling Senjougahara everything without lying, I of course included that conversation, but I hadn't told her my impressions of what we had talked about.

"Um, well, it sure was a mysterious story. No, maybe it wasn't mysterious? I don't know if I should say it was a romantic story—the fact that in the surface of the water, Kanbaru's dad saw the image of the girl he would be tied to in the future."

That was the story.

When Kanbaru's dad was a kid, while he bathed in that cypress bath, he saw the form of a young girl that he didn't know—no, not always, but occasionally, he apparently he saw the image of the partner he would elope with in the surface of the water.

He thought it was surely just a hallucination, so he didn't really mind it that much—and the image stopped appearing after a while, but when it stopped, within his mind he thought, 'What exactly did this hallucination mean?' and was caught up in it, so when Kanbaru's dad met Kanbaru's mom—that is, Gaen Tooe—he was extremely shocked.

Almost as if.

That encounter was supposed to be fated.

"It feels kind of like some magic charm that girls would like. When you look into the surface of the water in your sink, the face of the partner you're tied to for life will be reflected back at you, wasn't there something like that—"

But since the story was about Kanbaru's dad, instead of girls you'd have to assume it's for boys in their youth, and since it's a story from when he was a kid, the two were apparently tied together while they were still pretty young, so it's not really a discomforting story.

Romantic.

Although, as I say that, is it actually okay to say it like that?

Well, from the knowledge of a high schooler thrust blindly into the world of examinations, the water surface could act in place of a screen… but, in this case, your 'fated partner', or rather, 'the face of someone you'll meet in the future' showing up is rather mysterious.

It's completely different from that sandbox from some time ago.

Water has even less of a fixed shape than sand does—and while the cypress bath did seem to be rather old, it didn't seem like there was anything wrong with the bottom of it.

"Hm."

said Senjougahara.

"Incidentally, when you looked at the surface of the water when Kanbaru told you to, Araragi-kun, who was reflected there? Was it me? Me? Or perhaps me?"

"You're annoying!"

"Hanekawa-san? Kanbaru? Hachikuji-chan?"

"Scary!"

I shuddered.

"No, there wasn't anybody reflected there… It was just my own reflection, like normal."

"Eh? Does that mean, Araragi-kun's, your fated partner is… yourself?"

"Be quiet. Of course it's not myself!"

Even though she always talks in such a flat tone of voice, she makes a point to sound surprised at times like these.

"I've heard something like that before. A myth where someone was captivated by his own reflection in the water, and ended up drowning himself… What was it again?"

"You definitely know it, don't you? You just want to hear me say the word 'narcissist'."

"There's also a story that goes like this. A dog with a piece of meat in his mouth saw his own reflection in a river, and when he thought he'd go for the meat 'in' the water and barked, the meat in his own mouth fell into the river… Such foolishness—it's surely an Araragism."

"There's no such word as Araragism! Don't make me into the standard for foolishness. Anyway, from my point of view, the water was just water. And the surface of the water was just that."

"Hmm. Even though you're a vampire, your reflection still shows up in the water, huh."

"No, I'm not a vampire any more… It's just after-effects that are remaining. I show up in mirrors too, like normal."

"I've also heard that vampires can't cross rivers or swim… Araragi-kun, can you swim?"

"Hm? No, I've never tried it… I wonder, if you think about it normally, I should be able to swim, right?"

In any case, disregarding me, I wonder how Shinobu might be.

She may be a little girl, so to speak, but the level of her vampirism seems higher than mine… Although, I get the feeling that it might be caused by her identity.

"Well, whether they're related to oddities or not, there are mysterious stories like that. If it was about her mom then it would be a different story, but since it was about her dad—
"

I didn't know what kind of person Kanbaru's mom was like, but just knowing that she had left that 'monkey' for Kanbaru made me want to ask about her.

Even knowing that those grandparents hated her even before their only son was taken from them.

"Instead of a magic charm, it might be a curse. One that sends your reflection to your fated partner."

"That's way too scary. What exactly would Kanbaru's mom's image be then?"

"Ju~st kidding."

Senjougahara said in a joking tone of voice. No, her tone of voice was flat; just the expression she used was joking.

"It's just a jo~ke."

"…Well, I knew that it was a joke."

"Well, I've heard from Kanbaru about it before, you see."

"Eh?"

What was that, speaking so readily?

What are you starting off with without prefacing it with a 'by the way' or anything.

"What, I never said that I didn't already know about it, right? I've known Kanbaru for a long time, so I already knew that much. It would really be a shock, if she told you, whom she's just gotten acquainted with, something that I didn't know yet."

"....."

Hearing that, I could tell that when Senjougahara had heard about it wasn't after the formation of the Reborn Valhalla Combination, but during her middle school days.

"I bore no ill will. I was just enjoying the humorous situation where Araragi-kun was triumphantly telling me what I already knew."

"You're terrible!"

Being terrible even without ill will, what kind of a human are you?

"Well, the truth was that I had forgotten until you told me. I just remembered while you were in the middle of telling me. Thinking, ah, I've heard something like that before—not to mention, when I was invited to Kanbaru's house and I borrowed the bath, I was a good kid and didn't say anything unrefined."

"Eh?"

Hm? Something unrefined?

What, what was that supposed to mean?

"Of course, unlike Araragi-kun, I entered the bath together with Kanbaru. Huhu, aren't you jealous?"

"No, I don't need to hear something like th..."

Kanbaru and Senjougahara had entered the bath together.

Rather than jealous, it was just scary.

I don't even want to get close to it anymore.

"...What did you mean when you said you didn't say anything unrefined?"

"Like I said, since my personality was good at the time, I wasn't that terrible ill-natured girl like I am now."

That's a little too much self-awareness, I thought, taking a breath.

But Senjougahara wasn't concerned about me.

"I didn't unrefinedly include interpretations to that romantic love story that didn't even amount to an oddity story, is what I meant—"

She said.

006

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line.

Even without having to reference Narcissus from Greek mythology, people, no matter who they are, love themselves—different from self-love or self-intoxication, but from a biological standpoint.

Because of the instinct to pass on one's genes to one's descendants.

Humans respect themselves, and think of themselves as the ideal.

Was what Senjougahara said.

"Eh? What? So, are you saying that Kanbaru's dad just saw his own face in the surface of the water like a mirror and thought it was his 'fated partner'? Um, no, I don't think… that could happen."

"Why do you say that?"

"That just seems idiotic."

"That's why it's an idiotic story. It's just that if she pointed it aout, Kanbaru would be making her own dad sound idiotic, so she didn't point it out. As a middle schooler I did the same, and even the me right now might be a bit strict about pointing it out."

"Then, in that case, about the tale of the dog from earlier. You know, right? Do you think that there's someone in this world who'd mistake their own face?"

"There's no one in this world that knows their own face very well. When you see yourself in a mirror, your left and your right are reversed, after all. Even in photos or videos, the color tinge and three-dimensionality are completely different, right? The true appearance of the self that you see is actually what you know the least about."

"No, that's not what I'm talking about…"

"For example, Araragi-kun, the members of a family in another home all look alike, don't they? But to them, they don't think they look alike at all. Even you and your sisters look so alike to the point of discomfort to outsiders, but you might not think you resemble each other that much."

"You sound fine when you say it's discomforting… But, well, it's not like I don't understand what you're saying. But isn't that just because people who are used to seeing something can tell the differences, and those who aren't used to it are easier to fool? Like how experts can tell a counterfeit from a real one even when untrained people think they're the same—"

"Yes. Well, it's not really the same but that level of understanding is good enough."

"It's not the same… But either way, anyone should be able to tell the difference between their own reflection and someone else's in the water, shouldn't they?"

"Not exactly. Perhaps if it were a mirror—but not for the surface of the water."

"……"

"The water's surface can shake and glisten and blur—it's not as good as a mirror. You know about the uncanny valley, right? When CG or robots imitate humans, the more they imitate, the less they actually feel human—because you can be more easily fooled, you start to find it uncanny. As a comparison, something like this is more accurate."

"The uncanny valley..."

"For the uncanny valley, if you can just cross that valley, then they say that your familiarity will increase dramatically after that. The reasons for family incest or hatred are along the same lines. Anyway, your image reflected in the water may conversely look less like yourself—I've heard of well-crafted mirrors that don't reverse the left and the right of a reflection, but most people would probably feel something like this if they looked into it—'this isn't me'. Incidentally, when you look at the reflection of a friend or family member in the mirror, you do get an uncomfortable feeling that it resembles them."

"...Because it's different from the 'obvious' reflection he saw in the mirror every day, he didn't think his reflection in the water wasn't him?"

"Yes. And isn't it possible that he might have seen that blurred reflection of his as a girl?"

"Well... It's true that there aren't many differences in men and women, especially so when you're just a kid—this might be the answer if this was some fortune-telling or charm that girls did, but once he became an adult, and got a better sense of judgment, he'd normally notice, wouldn't he?"

"He did notice. That's why it stopped appearing."

"....."

"It's a completely different story as to how well he recalled that memory of seeing something in the past. In this case, all that Kanbaru's dad could remember would be that he saw an image that looked like a person in the surface of the water, right?"

"...So is that why he thought it was his 'fated partner'? That's a really powerful wrong impression—well, it does sound like Kanbaru's dad, though."

"The order is different, isn't it? It was after he met someone he thought was his 'fated partner' when he thought that who he saw in the water's surface resembled her."

"Hm...? Ah, is that so... That makes sense. Hearing it from third-person perspective makes the cause and effect seem reversed... But thinking of it from the point of view of the person himself, it does turn out that way. Like the answer to a question from his childhood had just shown up."

"In romance, after all, you'd end up looking for someone who resembles you, so—"

So.

Senjoughara didn't continue after saying up to there.

"Well, this is just an interpretation of mine."

she said, wrapping it up.

Wrapping it up like that might just be a way of hiding her embarrassment—or perhaps it's an explanation for the fact that she wouldn't be able to accept that romantic story without giving it some sort of reasoning.

After all, we wouldn't be able to know the truth.

That’s why it wasn’t a solution but an interpretation—was what Senjougahara said.

Kanbaru, and Kanbaru’s dad, had understood it in one way, and Senjougahara and understood it in another way. Senjougahara might think Kanbaru’s dad’s interpretation was ‘unreasonable’ or ‘impossible’, while Kanbaru’s dad might think Senjougahara’s reasoning was what was ‘unreasonable’ or ‘impossible’.

Kanbaru’s dad.

If it was only in that bath—in other words, if it was only in that well water that he saw ‘her’ appearance, then it can support the possibility that the water itself was mysterious.

Senjougahara would probably say that if it’s only limited to one place, then it probably has to do with the kind of lighting that causes the reflection to turn out that way, or some explanation like that, but, well, if you asked me which type I was then I was probably this type of person—the type unable to accept the romantic as romantic, and ending up complaining about it. So in the end, I didn’t feel like making any unrefined retorts.

Well, in the same vein.

Senjougahara and I could bear resemblances to one another—as boyfriend and girlfriend, it was possible that we resembled each other.

Instead of saying,

"Well, farewell. Good night. Let’s meet at school tomorrow."

she said,

"If you say too much to Kanbaru I’ll kill you. If you do tell her, I won’t forgive you. If you let something slip on accident, please kill yourself by tomorrow."

and ended the call with those parting words.

I really didn’t get that girl—and as I thought that, I also thought that it should just barely be okay at this time, and made a call to Kanbaru.

As an excuse, it was to report to her that I had made it home safe, but my real intentions were that there was something I wanted to ask her—and I wasn’t planning on saying too much.

Since I didn’t want to kill myself by tomorrow.

"Hey, Kanbaru. There was something I forgot to ask you—but what about you? In that bath, when you look at the surface of the water, what do you see?"

The reason I asked was.

If Kanbaru’s dad’s explanation was correct, then Kanbaru’s fated partner would show up—but if Senjougahara’s explanation was right, then the image that might be reflected could possibly be.

Kanbaru’s mom.

It could possibly be Gaen Tooe.

Just like Kanbaru's dad—her image might show up in the water. Kanbaru might mistake her own reflection in the shaking water for her blood-related mother, after all. The image of her mother, who had been a great influence on Kanbaru's life, and who had left an influence in her left arm even now—or perhaps, since I didn't know which parent Kanbaru resembled, it wouldn't be strange if Kanbaru saw her dad's reflection instead. Both are possible depending on how the water shakes.

Dad or mom.

It's even possible that she—would see both of them lined up.

If that was the case—then that would be even more romantic. Though the parents of Kanbaru had passed away, they were still together in her field of vision—"

"Hm? Ah, then I can see my own breasts. If I do say so myself, they're very erotic, and I stare at them all the time when I'm bathing. The contrast with my abs below them is really vivid, and every night I feel a rush of blood when I look at them. In all honesty nothing else enters my vision. So, what about it, Araragi-senpai—"

I hung up.



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

8

August

Koyomi Wind

001

If I were to consider how the middle schooler named Sengoku Nadeko thinks about roads, or if she's ever thought about roads in the first place, then I can't help but come to the conclusion that she hasn't thought about them. This might be an arbitrary bias and an extremely rude way of describing her, but since she's always living with her head down and her eyes lowered, probably the only thing she can see is not the road but her own feet.

She's living while looking only at her own shoes.

But that doesn't mean that it's a bad thing.

I don't want you to misunderstand—by no means am I criticizing her. After all, there's someone like me, who, far from lowering his eyes, actually closed his eyes when he walked, and even ran depending on the situation—so how I would I be able to condemn Sengoku for looking only at her own feet?

A step.

Step by step.

Continuing to watch her feet, her shoes as she walked no matter which way she was, after all, a stressful life in itself.

That was also life.

That in itself was life.

It wasn't something to be denied—at the very least, it wasn't something that could be easily denied.

Of course, even if it was life, it probably wasn't a path for humans. For her, who doesn't understand what kind of road she walks, who doesn't even know the name of the road she walks on, there was no path she could speak of.

And if there was to be another, more important, the most important, point to be identified regarding Sengoku Nadeko's way of life—it would be that, if she was living life while looking down and hanging her head…

If she was living life paying attention to the movement of her feet, then it was likely that she wouldn't fall, stumble, or trip over something—but as long as she wasn't walking while looking in front of her, then she wouldn't be able to run away from any dangers that she collides with.

It might not seem too important, but putting aside stuff about the path for humans and so on—but they say that the path of snakes is the path of evil.

But in regards to the path of snakes.

As long as you're watching your feet, there's no way you'll step on it.

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"S-sorry to intrude, Koyomi-onii-chan."

"Oh, you're here, Sengoku. Come in."

"Um, now that I think about it, I shouldn't be intruding, so I'll go back home."

"Don't go back the second you make a visit!"

"G-g-goodbye. I had fun today."

"There's no way you did!?"

"I... it was the best day of my life."

"You—What exactly is fun about the entrance of the Araragi household! And are you supposed to be a master of life!?"

It was early August—a day in summer vacation.

On the day the incident of a certain con man was resolved, a friend of my younger sister, Sengoku Nadeko, came to visit my house—just as we had promised.

The pretext for it was that I had first heard the info regarding that con man from Sengoku, so it was a follow-up report regarding that along with something of a thanks.

In terms of socially correct etiquette, I felt like it made more sense for me to be the one going to her house to say my thanks, but last month, when I visited her house to play, we did have a pretty good time playing the Game of Life and whatnot, but at the very end, there was a strange development where I was made to leave as if I was running away from Sengoku's mother, so I was kind of reluctant to visit a second time.

It might be my animal instinct.

Or perhaps even my oddity instinct.

So along those lines, I called Sengoku and invited her to my house—I thought we'd meet up somewhere else so that I could pick her up, but she had said,

"It's all right,"

and that was that.

Well, the month before last, she had come to my home alongside Kanbaru before, so she knew where it was—and rather, even before that, she'd frequently come to visit my sisters during her elementary school days.

So instead of it being that she didn't need to be picked up, it might be that I'd be going to way too much trouble—they say that grandparents dote on their grandchildren, but that doesn't compare to the way big brothers dote on their siblings.

But even so, I knew that Sengoku was the kind of person that wasn't too reliable, so I was worried as to whether she'd arrive by the expected time or not, and was planning to go all out to look for her if she didn't come, but the doorbell of the Araragi home rang right on time.

It was an accuracy comparable to a radio clock, almost as if she had been listening to a time report outside the front door when she had pressed the button—but Sengoku wouldn't be able to listen to anything like that, since she had no cell phone.

But if that was the case, maybe she synchronized the second hand of her watch or something—but nobody could be that sensitive about time.

It's obvious that Sengoku's calls coming in at exactly zero-zero minutes is just a commonly occurring coincidence.

"But anyway, come on in. It's all right, I made sure to clean my room properly."

"Ah, um, yeah…"

"I've made all the preparations for entertainment. Today, it'll be a party that lasts through the night!"

"Ee-eek!"

Since Sengoku seemed to be nervous in someone else's home despite it being a childhood friend's home, I'd thought I'd calm her down with a joke, but it seems she took it seriously and got frightened.

Hmm.

Although, I don't think I've seen Sengoku ever be not this hesitant since we met again in June.

Sengoku = hesitant.

Since it was a problem of her personality, I don't think it was something I could do anything about—so the best I could do was to watch over her carefully.

Last time, when I had gone to visit her house, she had used a hairband to pull back her bangs, but probably because she had been walking around outside, she had gone back to her default state—that is, she had let down her bangs.

I couldn't see her expression.

That's why, to be honest, I couldn't tell what she was thinking.

She seemed like she was being shy, or being reserved, but it was also possible that she just didn't want to be here.

If she was bewildered because she was unable to refuse the rude invitation of her friend's brother and had to go to a house that she didn't even want to be in, then that would be inexcusable, or rather it would've been better to just disagree…

I want to believe that that wasn't the case.

It would at least help if she would just say how she felt—really, it would be all right if it was even a hundredth of Kanbaru.

Even though, following the incident with the con man, a cloud had been cast on Senjougahara's sharp tongue, or her eloquence—rather, a sign of her rehabilitation could finally be seen—I didn't want to think about what would happen if it became known that I was actually hated by a friend of my sister.

It would really be bad for my studying.

"Like I said, take off your shoes and come in already."

"Y-yes. Understood. I'll take them off. I'll do as you say, I will!"

"....."

Sengoku seemed even more frightened than usual...

Even if she hated me, there was nothing to do at this point, but it would be nice if she didn't actually behave like she was suspicious of me.

Anyway, Sengoku, showing restraint or perhaps thoughtfulness, or to be precise, continuing to show hesitation, somehow managed to get through the doorway in the end—and I took her just like that upstairs.

"To be honest, Tsukihi-chan was also supposed to be with us... But it seems she has some clean-up work to do again."

"Ah, clean-up work? What kind?"

"Cleaning up after that con man—although, I don't really know what she's doing specifically. I honestly have no idea what's going on in Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan's minds—"

For that matter, I had no idea what was going on in Sengoku's mind either.

It's possible that I just simply didn't understand the minds of middle school girls—but, if I started to say that, it's not like I knew what anyone was thinking in the first place.

Even Shinobu, who I'm linked to.

I can't say that I understood her, either.

"W-waah. It's true. It's a party, you set up a party!"

While piling on hesitation upon hesitation, when we finally—taking what felt like thirty minutes, though it was a short distance that didn't even take thirty seconds—finally entered my room, Sengoku managed to speak in a happy voice.

Or, rather than when we entered my room, it was more when she saw the snacks and juice I had prepared on the floor of my room.

It was really a bit modest for a party, and there wasn't any sort of surprise planned—and the way she received me at her home the other day seemed much more luxurious—but if she was happy with it, then that made me happy, too.

Although, it wasn't me who planned this 'party', but my sister... It was after she kindly set this up for me that she went out for that 'con man clean-up'.

Well, I didn't really like that shrewdness of hers, but I guess that's why she was a big name in the world of middle school girls in this town.

Just entertain Nadeko-chan as if you were me, she told me—what exactly is she ordering me to do, that sister of mine?

"U, uwaah. It's popcorn, all right. Popcorn, I'd love to stuff my face with it… I'd like to cram it until I can't breathe. And then I'd like to swallow it without chewing!"

"You'll die!"

"Oof…"

Sengoku, speaking as if she was intoxicated, crouched down there.

It was surprising that she was so happy to see snacks… Could it be that she wasn't allowed to eat sweet stuff like this at home?

She seemed so pampered, but I guess that had nothing to do with being given sweets…

I'm kind of surprised.

"And, phew."

She said.

After sitting down on a cushion, she began to take off her socks, both of them. I guess she wanted to be barefoot—or rather, she had already become barefoot while I was watching.

She politely folded up her socks and set them aside.

"……"

She had taken off her socks almost as if she was taking off her hat when indoors, but… huh? I didn't get it. Was there any manners along the lines of taking off your socks when you entered someone else's room?

Since there weren't many times when I entered someone else's room, I didn't have enough experience to check with, so I didn't know…

If I think of the rooms I've been in, then they've only been Senjougahara's and Kanbaru's rooms… In the case of Kanbaru's room, rather than taking off my socks, I'd needed to wear shoes with really thick soles or my feet would get hurt.

"S-so, Tsukihi-chan is out right now…"

Sengoku said, looking like she was itching to get her hands on the snacks in front of her but was controlling herself to stay patient.

"Karen-san, too?"

"Yeah. Those two are a set, after all. They're sold as a package deal."

Well, their sizes might be too different to put into a package deal… Even if you wanted to get them as a set, you might not be able to package them well enough. They're really sisters that are hard to treat.

Though some might say not to treat sisters like that.

"And… your parents?"

"My parents are out, too—that is, they're at work. Since days off or summer vacations are nothing to my parents. Or rather, they don't have either of those."

"H, huh… Th-then, today it's just Nadeko and Koyomi-onii-chan, just the two of us."

"Hm? Well, I guess it is just the two of us. Is there something about that?"

"Of course there's no problem with it. Ehehehehehe."

Sengoku laughed in a cute way.

She finally laughed, huh.

So she was just nervous because she was thinking about my parents, huh? That made sense—it wasn't uncommon to be nervous about someone else's parents.

I had a pretty hard time with Senjougahara's dad, and even without dragging out that example, I had to run away from Sengoku's mom as well. And even though I'm used to it now, and go over to meet them even when Kanbaru isn't there, at first I was nervous to meat Kanbaru's grandparents as well.

"Well, first of all. Welcome, Sengoku!"

I poured juice into the two glasses that were set there earlier, and handed one to Sengoku for a toast.

"Y-yes! Thank you, Koyomi-onii-chan! Cheers! Happy birthday!"

"……"

My birthday was in April.

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"Oh… So you were able to settle it completely. That's great!"

While I obviously couldn't tell her about everything that happened, I finished telling Sengoku all I could regarding the case of the con man while munching on snacks and drinking juice.

Sengoku looked relieved.

But rather than relieved—it was more like a heavy load had been lifted from her shoulders. And that made sense, considering that she had been in a situation that was a step further, a step deeper into the case than the middle school girls around her.

Thanks to Oshino—and surely thanks to Kanbaru as well—we didn't have to go any further in, but it's likely that she was beside herself with anxiety up until now.

"Well, I don't know if I'd be able to say 'completely'—from my point of view, I'd say it left a bad aftertaste, or there's still kind of a gray area, or…"

I said.

"…Well, it's kind of a vast and moderate conclusion."

"But, it's not going to get any worse, right?"

"Yeah… Well, in that sense, there won't be anything that exceeds this, I guess."

Though it wasn't really clear whether there won't be anything or whether there can't be anything.

It really wasn't clear.

It was kind of a negative way to look at things, but in the end, in the sense that it won't grow worse from here on, a conclusion is a conclusion.

No, even without that, a conclusion is a conclusion—since my sisters were sticking their heads into things carelessly, I shouldn't need to criticize them from the side.

The bystander's vantage point is good, too.

It might be a bit presumptuous to hold a victory celebration party like this, too—but, well, setting aside that reasoning, the fact that that terrible con man left this town is reason enough to celebrate.

After all, we made him promise that he won't appear in this town again—that in itself was a big enough result to hold a huge party.

"So you said Tsukihi-chan was doing some 'clean-up work'… I twonder how that's going now?"

"Twonder?"

Is that a Twitter thing?[1]

Though Sengoku was more a Twister type of person than a Twitter type of person…

"Ah, no."

Sengoku corrected herself.

"I wonder how that's going now?"

"I dunno."

Though I had gone and made Sengoku correct herself, my response had ended up somewhat blunt; but there was nothing else I could say but "I dunno" to that question—unlike my sisters, I wasn't exactly well-versed in the network of middle-school girls.

If you think about it, that makes what the con man was doing even more weird… And kind of revolting.

A good luck charm.

A curse.

Intentionally using oddities to spread a disease—

"Um… So the clean-up work that Tsukihi-chan is doing has to do with taking back those oddities that were spread one by one?"

"No… That sounds a bit impossible. I'd probably say they'd do something more like caring for the victims then that—but, well, they might actually do that, too."

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[1] Nadeko accedentally uses Japanese Twitter slang here.

Though I didn't know if they would do that or not, wasn't it a bit beyond their capabilities? Going that far would completely be in the domain of an information war. Even if they were the chief officers of the Fire Sisters, it would be too much for them—although, to say "even if they were the chief officers" makes you wonder what the scope of the Fire Sisters really is.

"The F-fire Sisters are really amazing, Koyomi-onii-chan. It might be hard for Koyomi-onii-chan to see it because they're your family, but they really, really, really are amazing, the Fire Sisters are."

"Is that so…"

"They're really, leery amazing!"

"Leery?"

Seeing that docile, reserved Sengoku insisting on this so strongly made me think that it was possible that they are amazing, even if I was still half unconvinced.

Maybe the Fire Sisters are amazing.

"Really! I feel like I can act all self-important just by telling my class that I'm friends with the Fire Sisters!"

"Do you really act self-important in your class…?"

That's amazing.

For someone like Sengoku to be like that…

"I, I don't, though."

Sengoku coughed and cleared her throat.

It was a cute cough.

"But really, and it's not an exaggeration, but saying that the Fire Sisters are my friends has enough force to be able to collect money from it!"

"That's a problematic force…"

Not to mention, it sounds like the beginning of fraud.

It could be used in some type of fraud where people pretend to be someone else—there's a saying that says that oversized justice can adversely produce crime instead, and the Fire Sisters may have actually already reached that point.

Though from their point of view, they'd probably be reluctant about it…

"Speaking of which, recently an imitation group called the Gold Sisters has shown up."

"That's kind of an obvious imitation, isn't it."

Although if you asked me, my sisters were more of a fake—though I shouldn't say as much. Even though to me they were slovenly, the kind of slovenly where they would walk around naked in their home, to Sengoku the fact that they were friends from a long time ago hasn't changed.

And she probably wouldn't want to hear her friends being insulted, even by a family member.

"Ba-dump! It looks like some people called the Fire Sisters have appeared!"

"Is this just a plug for a spin-off?"

Or rather than a spin-off, it could be a completely new show.

So that's it, before I knew it my sisters were already heading towards the final episode…

"Well, putting aside what those two are and aren't capable of, since gossip lasts but one season[2], you know. For those ghost stories that that con man spread around, I think the best thing to do is keep them under supervision but leave them alone without interfering."

"That seems difficult…"

said Sengoku.

"I was wondering if there was something I could do. If I could help Tsukihi-chan… I wanted to come and talk about that today, if possible."

"If there was something you could do, then I think it'd have to be getting back on your feet after that snake incident properly—although I know it won't be the same as before."

"…When you say getting back on my feet, it makes it sound like I was already standing before that. I feel like I've only ever been crawling before that. Not standing on the ground, but crawling on it. Like a snake—"

And when I thought to myself about how pessimistic she was being, she went,

"Ah, awawa!"

And, as if confused, she stuffed a handful of popcorn into her mouth. She did just as she had said she wanted to do. She was like a squirrel—or, rather, she actually did seem like a snake.

Though of course she couldn't swallow all of it just like that.

She chewed on it with loud crunching noises.

"Wha, what exactly are you doing…?"

I asked her even as I thought that no matter what she did, she was cute.

"Munch munch, munch."

First finishing up her popcorn, Sengoku said,

"How should I say it, Koyomi-onii-chan? In my case it's obvious… but… How did Mister Con Man…"

Calling him "Mister" Con Man was so like Sengoku that it was kind of endearing, but it was kind of a tiresome expression for someone who'd met that "Mister" Con Man directly.

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[2] Japanese idiom

If it weren't Sengoku calling him that, I'd want to say not to call him "Mister".

"How exactly did he spread those rumors?"

"Hm?"

"The rumors… or the charms… or the ghost stories. That occult stuff… how did he spread them?"

"…Well, that is, he was aiming for a get-rich-quick scheme—so he first gave charms out as a trial run for free, and then asked for a fee for the full version afterwards."

Thinking about it, it is a strategy they use these days.

They'd give out the basic foundational stuff for free, and then charge you for additional options… For having a job as a con man for his whole life, he sure does follow the trends.

Well.

Being a con man is less of a job and more of a crime, though.

"No, that's wrong, Koyomi-onii-chan. I'm not asking 'why', I'm asking 'how'—"

"Hm? Ah, not what he was aiming for but the way he did it? If it's the way he did it, then—"

I was thinking that I would knock down everything she wanted to know in one sitting to be the "onii-chan" she could rely on, but when I actually tried, I couldn't think of anything to say.

The way he did it?

Spreading rumors among middle school girls is kind of a vague… So really, what did you have to do for it to be possible?

As a specialist, Oshino's job was gathering oddity stories—so to collect urban legends, street gossip, and other rumors, he had come to this town, and left this town.

Putting aside the dispute over whether a job could only consist of something like that, it's something that's easy to understand—it's simply casting a net and cathing the flowing rumors and the spreading gossip.

In a way, it's like being an observer, a capturer, and an observer—so basically, though being on the listening side isn't that simple, anyone could do it more or less, as long as they tried.

And there are other ways like going around on foot and investigating directly, or, more modernly, looking something up on the Internet—those are also ways to do it.

But, what about the reverse?

Urban legends.

Street gossip.

Rumors—spreading them not as the listener but the speaker.

Spreading them instead of gathering them—what specifically did you have to do to do that?

Transmission instead of reception.

And not just normal transmission, but being able to control the flow of information afterwards—so it's not going to be something mediocre or uncertain.

Not casting a net—but setting a trap. What would that be?

"...Sengoku. In your case, you dealt with that con man's rumors as ghost stories, right?"

Snake.

The snake oddity.

"Y-yes. Although I failed."

"Regardless of whether you failed or not—at that time, when you were dealing with it, you read books, didn't you? You didn't buy anything from the con man."

That should be right. I myself saw Sengoku doing research at the bookstore, so I wasn't wrong—well, there wasn't any part of that con man's plan that wasn't terrible, but if there was still salvation from it.

If she was going to forcibly look for salvation, then Sengoku Nadeko would avoid direct contact with that con man. If that human with such a sinister appearance that you didn't know if he really was human or not, and Sengoku who was more timid than a chihuahua, were in the same place at the same time, I didn't think that she would come out of it safely.

Karen had gone and met him like that.

If that had been Sengoku...

"R, right. Although thinking about it now, if I tried hard enough, it's not like I wouldn't be able to get in contact with him."

Except Sengoku said something like that.

Surprisingly bravely.

"If I had met with that con man... I would have tied him up and given him to the police!"

"That's impossible!"

I ended up retorting normally.

Putting that aside, well, it wasn't like I would be able to do anything about it after I knew how—and it wasn't like Sengoku asked me about it because there was a pressing reason, but it would be a lie to say that I wasn't interested.

That con man.

How did he manage to spread those rumors?

"In the first place, who did everyone hear those rumors from? From the con man himself—although, probably not, right?"

"Everyone around me said this. They'll probably answer Tsukihi-chan's question like this, too."

Sengoku said.

"Rumors in the wind—they said."

"....."

Wind?

004

"Urban legends are apparently called folklore in English... And apparently it has the implication of being a story that you hear from a 'friend of a friend'. But when you look for that 'friend of a friend', they never seem to exist—"

In regards to the subject of the con man itself, there was nothing else to talk about with Sengoku—or for that matter, there was nothing that we could talk about, so until Tsukihi and Karen got back, we decided to have a discussion on this instead.

It's a bit of an exaggeration to call it a discussion, though, since it was more just to satisfy our curiosity—I didn't think it could actually be useful.

But even so, when I thought about it after putting aside the con man's rumors for a moment, I realzed that there indeed was something like that during spring break, as well.

It's already been several months since then—but at the time, when I hadn't been preparing for exams yet, hadn't been affected by oddities yet, and hadn't been in the same class with Hanekawa yet, when I spoke to Hanekawa for the first time I heard a rumor of a 'vampire'.

A vampire with golden hair.

The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire.

She was excessively beautiful—that was also a rumor that spread among the girls.

Whether it was the charms planned by a con man or the stories of a 'vampire', the common point is that they were prevalent among girls.

But that didn't mean that there was some common foundation for it—it could just mean that there was a stronger trend for girls to enjoy gossiping than boys did.

And you hear more about girls starting trends than boys starting them—so because folklore is more likely to spring up in communities like ours, did that mean the con man had intentionally targeted this community?

"...Well, no, since something like that is technically a rumor, too... Since there are girls like Sengoku that are outside the scope of rumors, and even for the vampire rumor, I was able to hear about it, even though I'm a boy."

"That’s true. That’s why, Koyomi-onii-chan, we need to debate the point in question about rumors that circulate more widely, more universally, without narrowing their targets."

"I guess so."

The language of “debating the point in question” seemed a little dubious, but since Sengoku was probably bad with language like me, so I’ll ignore it. It wasn’t my place to question the correctness of words, anyway.

"The process by which rumors spread—or is it the process by which one spreads rumors? How exactly did that con man manage to pull something like that off?"

The way urban legends spread.

The way one spreads street gossip.

"...But if that con man has an understanding of how to do something like that, then I get the feeling that he won’t have to do anything bad for the cost-performance of his tricks."

"But aren’t people not just restricted to pursuing cost-performance, Koyomi-onii-chan? I haven’t met him directly, but... From what I hear from Koyomi-onii-chan, he seems like the kind of person that enjoys deceiving people in itself..."

"Well, I guess there are people like that, too..."

Although, it probably isn’t a like or dislike kind of thing.

That was already a kind of disease... or, I suppose, something of a business.

That’s why, for a con man like him, it wasn’t a choice he freely chose to take—it’s possible that was the only path he could take.

Thinking about it like that made him sound like a victim again—was something that I absolutely did not think.

No matter how you think, he’s a perpetrator, isn’t he?

Don’t mess around like that.

"Well, it’s possible that we should be thinking of starting trends and making profits from those trends as separate things—after all, even though we said that con man failed..."

It’s kind of like selling stocks, isn’t it.

There was a difference between making baseless rumors to confuse the world, and making a profit off of it afterwards—that’s right, this was something we should have recognized in the discussion from the beginning.

"It’s not like we were going to, by figuring out how to spread trends—we had no plans of getting rich quick by solving the riddle of that con man’s techniques."

"Eh?"

Sengoku had a surprised look on her face, and to try and gloss over it, she went,

"Ah, uh, yes. That’s right. Of course."

…It made it seem a lot like she was planning to get rich quick.

Although, well, even if she did plan to get rich quick, that in itself wasn't something to reprimand.

If the income was earned in a legitimate way, then the money or profits shouldn't be criticized either—but from my point of view, as a high school third year that had to take the burden of a five million yen debt, I wonder what it's like to be able to rely on that.

"But Koyomi-onii-chan. If there really was a way to intentionally start rumors or trends… If there was some kind of artificial know-how, then that would be really amazing! It would be the discovery of the century! It would create a social phenomenon!"

"Er, I don't really want to create a social phenomenon… Even if we are thinking about it, we're not really sure if the trends of ghost stories or urban legends were even artifically started in the first place."

"B-but, I've heard about it before. Something like, people decide the popular fashion for next year in a meeting in the year before."

"Aah… I've heard something like that, too. But it doesn't sound like what actually becomes popular will be limited to what's decided in the meeting…"

I bet if Oshino were here, he'd be able to explain that easily for us.

Even if there weren't a con man, in reality there were still organizations that tried to create trends.

"—Well anyway, why don't we first try to define what being popular actually means?"

Well, even if I say that this won't be anything useful and is just to satisfy our curiosity, but I wouldn't say that I didn't have the slight hope that this could actually useful for a countermeasure if another con man like him came to this town and tried to exert his power.

If you know your enemy and know yourself… is what it was.

But even so, I couldn't really get the difference between baseless rumors and urban legends—if I classified them based on truth or lies, then all of them would be lies.

Reality is mixed with truths and falsehoods from the beginning, after all.

"Define… Would it be a definition like having heard it from a 'friend of a friend'? If we're talking about rumors in the wind—"

"It's too hard to define a 'friend of a friend'. Not to mention, hearing something from a 'friend of a friend' is practically the same as hearing it from just a friend—if we say it like that, then it'd mean that it spread like some sort of 'telephone game'…"

Around that time was when our meeting began.

It wasn't any kind of serious meeting to decide on what next year's fashion was going to be, but in order to bring out that sort of atmosphere, we cleaned up the snacks and set up a table.

With notebooks open and pens in hand, it seemed like a study session was about to take place. Although, the meeting that Sengoku and I were about to start would probably end in an instant if we added Hanekawa to the equation.

“‘You know about it before you realize it’ would be the first definition, I think. Yeah. So basically, even without actively trying to procure information, I still end up knowing about it…”

"That’s right. The ‘charms’ at my school felt like that, too. Before I realized it, they had spread throughout the whole school… Like it was the spread of a disease."

"Disease…"

"Although if we talk about the spread of a disease, it almost sounds like the influenza."

"No, for the influenza, the implication is usually ‘contagious’, isn’t it? If it spreads like a pandemic, though, then it makes more sense to think like that. Hm…"

But in that case, can we consider rumors to be a disease and define it as ‘contagious’? Though you can make a guess, it’s hard to specifically, concretely know where or from whom you got it from… And by the time you realize, the symptoms are already showing.

It does sound a lot like rumors in the wind.

In that case, it sounds less like wind and more like a cold.[3]

"If it’s like that, then when that con man came to this town, you could say he’s some kind of bioterrorist. And I think I’ve heard something about the ‘three rules of epidemics’ before…"

Um, I say while trying to recall.

If I heard about it, then naturally it had to be from Hanekawa—my knowledge was essentially founded upon what I heard from Hanekawa or Senjougahara, after all.

"Ooh. What are those? The three pillars."

"Er, no, the three pillars are something like friendship-effort-victory[4], but, let’s see…”

The three rules of epidemics.

Or perhaps, the three rules of pandemics.

"1. The rate of infection is high. 2. The range of infection is wide. 3. The restraints are ineffective—as I recall, it was these three. For these three rules, it seems like we could easily apply them to rumors, too."

"Speed, range, and power, is what it is, then?"

Sengoku described it like it was a game.

Now that I think about it, she was a gamer, wasn’t she.

"For speed and range, I can more or less understand… But what does it mean for the restraints to not be effective? Koyomi-onii-chan.

---

[3] 'Wind' and 'Cold' are both pronounced 'kaze' in Japanese.

[4] The motto of Weekly Shonen Jump.

"Er, it means what it says—once it starts infecting, once it starts spreading, you can't stop it. More accurately, it 'can't be stopped easily', is what it is…"

"But, 'A wonder lasts but nine days', doesn't it?"

"Aah. But for that, there's another meaning where until those nine days pass, you have no choice but to leave the rumor as is—"

That's why the Fire Sisters didn't have the choice but to lose the initiative. They were too late for everything—that's why to protect against infectious diseases, the only way was to take precautions not to catch it at all.

"I see…"

Sengoku nods solemnly.

It seemed like she was doing as much as she could to bring out the atmosphere of a meeting. It was a cute effort, but it wasn't really accompanied by results. I could only feel a sense of 'make-believe'.

Well, I didn't know if I was the same way, though…

"Rumors that occur naturally, and even the rumors that that con man spread artificially, they're both the same—I doubt that that con man actually had a plan to control the 'charms' he popularized…"

So no matter how well it went, his plan all along was to spread his business just for the sake of spreading, and disappear from this town without cleaning up after himself?

I'm getting an image of slash-and-burn agriculture…

"If we look at the example of Mr. Con Man, then the speed of infection was amazing… With just one chain of 'charms', it only took a few months before he got results."

"And for the range… Just one town itself is a pretty good scale."

It's a bit amazing to think that only one man was able to do that.

I wasn't trying to praise him, and I had no intention of doing so, but when we carefully inspect him like this, he really is incredible, that con man.

"Then, the last condition out of the three rules… Let's try to think of a way to achieve this. There's no way that we can't achieve what that con man could!"

Although, I thought that there were a lot of ways that we couldn't achieve what he could.

Well, there was no cost in just talking about it.

Although there was nothing more costly than a free gift.

"Sengoku. What would you do, for example? Er… If you wanted to popularize oddity stories. If you could intentionally set something up like that."

"Hmm… It's a little hard for Nadeko to understand concretely what you would need to do to create popularity…"

After thinking about it, Sengoku said,

"The simplest, quickest way I can think of is, ‘Make something that’s already popular even more popular’, maybe."

Ooh.

Even as she said it was hard to understand concretely Sengoku suggested a method that was surprisingly concrete, which surprised me—not to mention, it was rather precise.

"If there’s already a foundation or basis to some extent, then the route is already trailblazed for you… If you think about neurology, then in places where synapses connected once, the electrical signals can travel more easily the second or third time, right?"

Although there was probably no need to mention neurology, I was simply trying to show off for Sengoku. I just wanted to seem like an intellectual. Disregarding that I couldn’t really tell if I actually did sound like an intellectual or not.

"And if we wanted to think of variations, then it would be something like ‘make something that was popular in the past popular again’, huh… Even for ghost stories, they say there’s a ten-year cycle or a hundred-year cycle where similar stories show up… Like you said, this pattern is the simplest and quickest."

"I-is that so?"

Sengoku was being shy.

It was really cute.

"Ehehe."

"However, if that was the way to do it, then though you might be able to start a trend, it doesn’t seem like you’d be able to start any trends that you want to… Although it’d be okay if your goal was simply starting a trend in itself."

"Ah… Sorry."

"Er, that’s not something you need to apologize for…"

She really has a bad habit of apologizing, doesn’t she.

Since she had made it this far today without apologizing once, I thought she’d be able to make it until the end of the day, but, alas, it was futile to hope for that.

I’m a little opposed to using that con man as an example yet again, but if he were to try and spread his oddity story in an efficient manner, then it would be reasonable to use the oddity story of the ‘vampire’ that had already circulated among the girls as a foundation.

But the reason he didn’t do that was because he wouldn’t get the profits he wanted—’vampires’ couldn’t bring him money.

That’s the conclusion he came to.

"Over spring break, the reason the vampire rumor was so popular—or rather, the reason it was so easy to be popularized—was that the general idea of vampires was already famous, huh."

"That's right. There are hardly any people that don't know about vampires in Japan… In TV, manga, movies, and games, they always manage to squeeze something out. Rather than 'it was popular in the past', the feeling is more that it's already been diffused among the general population, maybe…"

"Hm. Diffusion, huh?…"

Well.

The way of the world is that something diffused will eventually go out of fashion, but the subject of our discussion was not going out of fashion but coming into fashion.

"Things that are famous… Basically, if it was related to some brand, then it would be easy to popularize. However, though there is a foundation, it might be a bit different from the definition of having a tremendous infectious capacity—since it would really mean that it wouldn't need any infectious capacity. What would it be if, instead of wanting to make something famous even more famous, but wanting to make something nameless into something famous for the first time?"

"Hmm… If that's the case, then what I said before, with TV, stuff like that… Would be the answer, maybe."

"So, the mass media?"

Introducing something via TV, newspapers, or magazines is certainly a general way for the sake of spreading that infection.

"Ah, yes. That's right. The mass media. Should I call it propaganda? Or advertising?"

"Advertising, huh… Well, without restricting it to advertising, anything shown in the media, whether it's fiction or non-fiction, has the intent of 'popularizing' and 'spreading' it, after all."

That was what was expected.

But while publishing something aimed towards spreading it to society, theories that aren't meant to be spread probably won't pass through. So successful people may often say, 'I didn't think this would be so widely accepted,' that's really either just humility or an indirect way of being boastful.

"However, this also kind of involves what we talked about earlier, but when you publicize something on TV or in the newspapers, doesn't that mean it's already become something famous by that time?"

"Hm… Well, that may be."

If the role of the mass media is to change 'people who know, know it very well' to 'everybody knows', then that first step is what is necessary. Of course, if you possess control of the mass media then that's a different story… But I highly doubted that that con man had that much political power.

I think he's the same type as specialists, like Oshino, who doesn't associate with organizations.

"If you think of the mass media as having one kind of power, then you would usually rely on that power to spread popularity… For example, if it was a school, then you'd use teachers, or class reps as an intermediary… It'd be something like that."

"That's right. If I wanted to circulate some kind of rumor… And if I wanted to consider the… cost-performance? Then I'd rely on Tsukihi-chan."

Said Sengoku.

"She's a celebrity among middle school girls, so if I tell the influential Tsukihi-chan a rumor—then it would be almost the same as telling a hundred people. Although, it only works if I assume that Tsukihi-chan spreads the rumor for me—Tsukihi-chan is kind of tight-lipped, huh."

"That's right—since she's the kind of person that can put up with my torture, after all."

"T-torture?"

"No, no."

I tried to play it off by waving my hand.

Either way, it was established that Tsukihi was tight-lipped—if we likened rumors to viruses, then she would be a considerable immune system.

Far from falling victim to that con man, she had wanted to exterminate him altogether—after all, even if you can't halt the spread of rumors, you can at least cut off the source of the infection.

"If you wanted to make something popular on a worldwide level, then it would be something like putting a famous personality on a billboard or something…"

"By a famous personality, that's basically a celebrity, right… So, he or she would probably be one of the trendiest. In the end, does that mean that in order to make something popular, you just have to put it with something that's already popular?"

When Sengoku said that, her tone of voice sounded a little bored—though she wasn't conspicuous about it, it was quite obvious that she started to lose interest.

Well, unlike a cynical high schooler like me, a simple middle schooler like Sengoku would probably find such a conclusion a little boring.

'Things that are popular are popular because they're popular'—such a business slogan exists, but that doesn't mean it's interesting at all.

It's not as if only good things are popular, either.

Bad money drives out good money—even if that was the truth, I would still insist on my ideals.

"…I think that the con man probably didn't use the methods we just talked about, though. Of course, I think we have the main point… But even so, it's not like he was able to contact any famous person directly. It's actually more likely that he planned it for a person like that to be told from a 'friend of a friend'."

"……"

"If I was looking at it from that con man's point of view..."

It was something I didn't really want to think about, but I'll endure it somehow.

"...Moreover, he probably wouldn't even want to get close to a person like that. Tsukihi-chan's name popped up earlier, but although that con man eventually got into contact with Karen-chan, but he left the town without ever seeing Tsukihi-chan—"

"So would that mean... people of higher status are also higher risk?"

"Yeah. So how should I say this, even though it sounds contradictory... Something that can spread without having to plan anything, without advertising or publicity or any action whatsoever—that's what the ideal virus would be."

"That's right... But... If you just expect something to spread on its own, isn't that the same as waiting for a rabbit to bump into a tree stump? Not artificially, but something more spontaneous... Aren't you just waiting for coincidence?"

"In that case..."

In that case, the technique the con man must have used would be, like the phrase "Throw enough mud and some will stick", he spread around a huge number of oddity stories and charms all at once—so his method was to use the likelihood of at least one of them eventually becoming popular.

He may have left it to chance.

The invisible hand of a god, so to speak—

"Except—with the amount of planning and groundwork he did, would he really leave it all up to chance...? Well, anyway, why don't we wrap up the discussion on the know-how of setting trends for now... Our conclusion for the time being is using something that everyone already knows, and trying to spread a large number of things at once..."

"Right."

"Next we can narrow the question down to the subject of the trend. Aside from what sort of things that you'd want to make popular, what sort of things are easy to popularize?"

Things that are easy to popularize.

Things that are highly infectious—things that can spread easily.

"Whether it's rumors or ghost stories or merchandise, once you think of something that you want to make popular, it's also important to put on the finishing touches by making it into something that's easy to popularize. So in the case of ghost stories, something 'scary' would be easy... right?"

"But, wouldn't something that's 'too scary' become less popular? It has to be something that's moderately scary so that you'd want to tell it to someone instead of being unable to tell it..."

"Hm."

So it's like needing to define the boundary where horror films end up becoming splatter films—it won't be any good if it's too extreme.

"But according to the generations, there are things that eventually go out of fashion, and though things might unexpectedly become popular, I think that once those unexpected trends were examined again, they had some unexpected features in common."

"So is it like the three rules of pandemics?"

"Rather than that, it might be something more like the three pillars—since it's been recognized that there are exceptions."

This was something that Senjougahara, not Hanekawa, told me. Though the way she said it was a bit different, it went something like this.

"They were easy to understand, easy to obtain, and easy to share—I think."

"Understand, obtain, share…?"

"By easy to understand, well, there's no need to explain, since even that's easy to understand. If it's something unintelligible or complex, then it will be hard to popularize. The attitude of 'only people who understand need to understand' really isn't very infectious—"

On the other hand, if you wanted to spread something complex, then you'd need to think of a method to convey it—to transmit it. Or possibly, even if it was complex, it would be an absolute requirement that it would be fine even if you didn't understand it.

So television, cell phones, computers, etc. were like that—even though the majority of people don't understand how they work, it's still used quite commonly…

"How about easy to obtain?"

"In a single word, it would be cheapness… But it's not just the price that matters. For example, no matter how cheap diamonds might get, because they're rare stones, it's pretty hard for people to get ahold of them. And finally, for easy to share, it would basically be something that everyone can enjoy together—no matter how good something is, if only one person monopolizes it, then it wouldn't be able to spread at all. It's easier for trends to form under a structure where people can share their work and impressions with each other."

By saying that, we had certainly pinned down the key point of the con man's popular 'charms'. Though we had already established his modus operandi of having a system where the starting point was free but there were additional fees afterward, but I can't help but think that his overall intention was to target his 'charms' at human relations.

Human relations.

He planned the deterioration of human relations—a trend.

I don't know if that falls under bad money driving out good money, but—

"The word 'to popularize' in Japanese comes from the word 'to be impatient'—it kind of gives off the image of 'being one step ahead'… But, if you stick to the rules too much, then in the end, you'll probably stray from your original goal of popularizing things the way you want, I think."

"That's right… Even if something unexpected gets popular, that doesn't mean you'll be able to stir up a wind according to plan… You really have no choice but to leave it to chance."

Leave it to the wind as long as it blows.

I guess it's something like that, said Sengoku.

"……"

So it's something like that, is it.

But still, it was hard for me to think of it that way.

That con man.

Kaiki Deishuu—to rely on divine providence for the fraud that he calls his occupation didn't sound much like his style. Rather than the invisible hand of a god—as for him, he probably wouldn't even grasp the hand of the devil.

005

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line.

In the end, there was no conclusion as to what technique this con man used to spread his 'charms' among middle school girls—the meeting that Sengoku and I had held had ended in that unproductive manner. Well, I suppose it might have been too early for Sengoku to have a talk on the way the world's trends should be.

Afterwards, Karen and Tsukihi came back as we were about to continue, so the meeting was ended—and after that, for the first time in a while the four of us played together. Well, during elementary school, Karen, who was a year older, probably didn't play with Sengoku all that much, so it was probably the first time this quartet had come together like this.

Sengoku's stranger danger skill was at maximum, but Karen, being sociable to the point that it could pose a problem, canceled it out with her interpersonal skill—in any case.

So when I came to know of the technique that the con man used, it would be some time afterwards—specifically, in the middle of August.

August fourteenth.

As for what happened exactly, it would be that I ran into him—or perhaps I could say I fell victim to him.

Though he said he would never return to this town again, though he said never again, he did come back once. Seriously, screw him.

At that time, while the main topic was on yet another specialist—I took the opportunity to ask him about it.

"Hm."

He said.

"The power to read the wind, the power to raise the wind—I don't have anything like that. Although, it's possible that that's a lie."

"....."

You can't trust anything he says.

But as I thought that I was being stupid for even asking...

"However, if you ask me, the power to read the wind isn't very important in the first place,"

he continued.

"Because for pandemics, the most important is a windless condition."

"Um—windless?"

"To start a pandemic, I think that's more important, Araragi."

"There's—no wind?"

“When something's popular, it means that something else isn't popular—strictly speaking, if something else tries to be popular, you could say it won't rise to the surface... That's why, if I wanted to popularize something as I want it to, then instead of picking the target, I'd pick the stage.”

"....."

"Gossip lasts just one season—in that case, you have to give up on setting a trend for that season. About this town specifically, I couldn't lay a hand here during spring break. Because the gossip about the 'vampire' was sweeping over. You can't oppose the overwhelming number-one being—and if you ask what exactly is overwhelming, then it would be that that virus was overwhelming the other viruses. So once that rumor died out—in a completely empty location, in a location that was starving, I plunged my own rumors in."

I realized it after he had said it.

Basically, once a blank space is created, a pandemic can be started—or, at the very least, it's a condition where it's easy to start a pandemic.

"Ghost stories, street gossip, urban legends—it's when the human heart is in disarray that these baseless rumors run rampant. When I say the human heart is in disarray, basically, there isn't anything to rely on. A generation without a trend—Araragi. Think about what kind of lame ducks a con man might want to target."

"Think about it...? I don't even want to think about something like that!"

"Without saying that."

"Don't demand weird things like that. But, well, that would be... The wealthy? Don't they go for the rich?"

"That would be what good people think. However, someone who's already satisfied is hard to deceive—humans with a surplus in their lives are humans with a surplus in their hearts. That's why the people that con men target are the dissatisfied, the humans without a surplus in their hearts."

"...That's why, when you came to this town, you went for the middle school girls?"

Or even.

Once—when he went for the Senjougahara family, whose daughter was ailing from an illness.

"I suppose. Hearts filled with anxiety are easy to deceive. Because even if they're possessed with lies, they don't have the freedom to verify them."

The con man said this shamelessly.

"You said that, for my plan, I spread the 'charms' to cause the deterioration of human relations—but it's actually the opposite. Because human relations were deteriorating, everyone jumped for my 'charms'."

A windless condition was not necessarily a sterile condition.

Rather, the virus waits in hiding to arrive at a more explosive pandemic—said the con man.

"...Are you saying it's their fault for being tricked?"

"When you say it like that, I want to agree. Perhaps I should just say that the generation was bad. 'Why is something like this so popular?' 'Was that popular?' If you want to discuss a chaotic state like that, you should first discuss the blank space before the chaos."

"Blank space—"

"The darkness, you might say. That's why I'll give you this piece of advice: if 'something that's utterly incomprehensible' starts getting popular—doubt your generation. Doubt the very ground you stand on. Consider that something might be very wrong—that it's a critical state of affairs. Whether it was started by a person or it occurred naturally—that's because the generation has been enveloped by darkness."

"Enveloped by—darkness."

"The easiness of popularizing something is similar to the easiness of rebellion—there's no firm ground upon which you stand on, so you end up going with the flow. Well, a generation like that makes it easier for a con man like mem to live, though."

Kaiki said this in a sinister tone.

And then, with a "Now, Araragi", he continued like this.

"Now that I've taught you a very important trade secret of mine, why don't I accept a fee from you?"

"....."

I had already paid up to gain information on a certain two-man specialist group—because of my careless question, an unthinkable option had sprung forth.

"My guess is that the money you kept for a crucial moment is in the inner pocket of your jacket."

I was completely seen through.

Hm.

It looks like today, the wind wasn’t blowing my way.



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

9

September

Koyomi Tree

001

I have no doubt that the path of karate that Araragi Karen walks is a steep and relentless one, but from the point of view of a blockhead like me, such a clear and distinct path like that one was enviable. If she weren't my sister, I would want to give her envious looks—but because she was my sister, I could only awkwardly turn my eyes away. Even so, a path that one could walk without getting lost, a one-way traffic path, a path where a map isn't even necessary, a path just like a highway—for a road like that to be decided with neither tremble nor tremor, then, well, if you asked me what I felt about that, then it would be a lie if I said that I had never imagined it before.

Putting your feet to the ground.

Stepping down.

And walking step by step on the path that I was supposed to walk, every day.

A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step—and he who walks a hundred miles should consider himself halfway at the ninety-ninth. And even if it's a journey without any end, you have no idea how blessed you are if you can at least see the path you're walking on in this world where even the immediate future is shrouded in the dark.

But neither the dark.

Nor darkness.

Exists in front of her.

Though I did say that I would want to give her envious looks if she weren't my sister, in that sense, if she weren't my sister, she had a human nature that would make me quite capable of falling in love with her—however, her way of life would be to constantly function with instructions written out for her.

Because her path was clearly decided—then how much of an impact would it have if she loses sight of that path? I don't even want to imagine something so cruel.

I've asked her this before.

If there was a situation that forced you to quit karate, what would you do?

I asked her.

A situation that forced her to quit.

A situation that forced her to give up.

That's right.

In other words, when she had no choice but to step off of the path she walked—that highway.

It wasn't as if I was trying to bother my sister with something improbable or exceptional—I was not a brother with ill intentions. Rather, my intention was to consider what might occur and worry for her well-being.

After all, it could very well happen.

Karate was a martial art where, if she trained day and night, she might get a serious injury that she can't recover from—or maybe her lover that she wanted to pledge her future to might beg her to 'stop doing something so dangerous'. Or maybe you'll be put in a position where she had to focus on her studies—even if her path was so clearly defined, no matter how well maintained that path was, it was still possible that machine trouble could arise.

The engine system, the electrical system.

The cause of the trouble could be anywhere—even if the path was bright, even if the sun was shining, that didn't mean the future was going to be bright.

Because darkness isn't always in front of you.

It can also come from within.

On the path you walk.

If you're brought to a standstill—what will you do?

Because unavoidable circumstances can go to anybody.

"That's not true, onii-chan."

But Karen said this.

Confidently, as if she had no idea what I had been thinking about.

"The goal of the path I walk is the place I fall. A situation where I'm forced to stop waling is the goal in itself!"

Without being brought to a standstill, she would walk until she fell.

Conversely, it could be a manifestation of heroic determination in which she wouldn't stop walking until she fell.

002

"It's this tree, onii-chan."

She said.

At the back of the dojo that I had been led to—Karen pointed out a single tree. If Hanekawa were here, she might have been able to identify specifically what kind of plant it was with just a single glance, but unfortunately, as my understanding of horticulture and forestry was shallow, I could only really tell that it was a 'tree'.

I didn't know if the phrase 'a shallow understanding' as the opposite of 'a deep understanding' was something that was commonly said, but anyway—well, if there was

anything else I could say, it would be that its current state very closely resembled that of a dead tree.

“This tree, huh?”

For the time being, I responded to Karen’s words like that—I didn’t feel the need to give any other reaction outside of that.

“Well—it’s a tree. It’s… thinner than I was expecting. I was imagining something sturdier from how you described it…”

“I never said anything like that!”

“But, it’s a tree that’s getting in the way, isn’t it?”

“I never said anything so awful, either! It’s only everybody else who thinks this tree is getting in the way—I’m an ally of this tree!”

“Hmm…”

I feel like the expression 'only everybody else’ has a charm of its own.

Putting aside the thought that even trees can have allies and enemies, it seemed that Karen, the older of my two younger sisters, empathized severely with this one tree.

Empathy.

My sisters, especially the older of the two, were known for their ability to hold overflowing feelings for anything—or, in other words, they could easily come to support anyone or anything.

And so, as one half of the Fire Sisters, she came to reign as somewhat of a celebrity among middle schoolers—but her personality could be considered risky if she made even a single mistake.

So instead of taking the story at face value, it was necessary for me to stay cool and composed as I listened to her speak—and as I thought that, I looked over at the tree and its appearance once again.

“……”

Late September.

I had come with my sister, Araragi Karen, to the dojo that she frequented—a privately owned dojo that held a karate class. Apparently, the dojo was owned by a 'master’ of full contact karate, and Karen has devoted herself to this place for several years now.

Since she’s demonstrated the skills she’s cultivated here quite a few times in regards to her older brother, it was hard to not feel a little bitter as I stepped inside the dojo… but I had no choice to enter due to the circumstances.

Well, despite my bitter feelings, the dojo was a place that I had been interested in visiting—with Karen being the kind of girl that rolls her eyes at courtesy or manners, I really wanted to meet the person she called her master.

Half of me wanted to say thanks for always looking after Karen, while the other half wanted to complain about the kind of things that my little sister was being taught.

So with my heart pounding, I had barely managed in an hour and a half to travel the distance to the dojo that would only have taken an hour for Karen, but unfortunately, the master was absent.

“That’s not what you said before!”

“Well, I never said I’d introduce you to Master. Or did I say that? When? What month, what day, what time? What rotation was the Earth on?”

“……”

Annoying.

If she weren’t my sister I’d hit her. Or perhaps this is the kind of childishness that makes me want to hit her because she was my sister.

“Karen-chan… I’m only not hitting you because you’re stronger than me, you got that?!”

“My brother says such pathetic things sometimes…”

Karen looked at me with pity.

It would’ve been all right if she looked amazed, but I didn’t want her to pity me.

“Hmm. Well, I have always been thinking about introducing the big brother that I’m so proud of to Master. So I thought this would be a good chance and brought you on a day off… but it seems he’s gone out.”

“Well, it is normal to go out on a day off… Or rather, did you not make an appointment or anything?”

“Master and I understand each other pretty well, so we don’t need an appointment or the Apollo Project or anything!”

“For one thing, there’s no such relationship where you’d need a spaceship. And if you look at today’s results, I’d say that you did need an appointment for today.”

“Gyahahaha. Stuff like that’s too complicated for me!”

Though her brother made it easy for her to understand, Karen wasted no time in laughing at the explanation and nimbly jumped over the gate.

The gate wasn’t that of an ordinary household but the kind that seemed fitting for a dojo, elegant and dignified with rather large doors, and she quite easily was able to run up like a ninja and jump over them.

I guess she doesn’t need any CG.

I almost wanted to market her as the antithesis of the recent film industry—and as I thought that, she opened the gate from the inside.

“Now, onii-chan, come on in, it’s over here.”

“You… Doesn’t this just make you a thief, instead of a ninja? You can’t just enter a place with nobody home.”

I didn’t think that I would have to teach something so fundamental to my sister who advocated justice, but Karen responded without hesitation, almost as if she was boasting.

“Don’t look down on the trust between me and Master, onii-chan. I’ve always come and gone like this whenever I wanted, and he’s never been mad at me.”

“This kind of student is unheard-of…”

I’ve decided.

Next time, I’m coming with our parents to this dojo. And we’ll formally apologize

“Now, now. It’s not like I’m going into his home or anything. It’s just the dojo, and sometimes the backyard.”

“But even so…”

“Don’t be such a stickler. Just be flexible with it, flexible. I’ll even help you with your calisthenics every day—”

“If I did calisthenics on your level, I’ll break a couple bones! It’ll be a splatter instead of a stretch!”

“Let’s go~!”

With light footsteps, Karen headed for the dojo—feeling a little envious for the ease with which she led her life, I followed her, and soon came to be introduced to the problematic 'tree’.

“Well, even if it is skinnier than I was expecting, it really is a tree—it has a pretty good presence.”

I said.

Once again, looking up at the problematic 'tree'—but as Karen would put it, the tree wasn’t problematic at all.

“Is that so? The fact that this tree was here—apparently, nobody had realized it until now.”

003

Let’s rewind the story again.

I was alone in my room, studying for entrance exams—the end of September could be considered the last spurt, and my enthusiasm was at an all-time high, if I do say so myself.

But though I diligently studied with an intensity that made other people unable to come near me, Karen easily came close enough to put her chest on my head.

“Hey, onii-chan~. It’s the boobs you love so much!”

“……”

The older brother had an incredibly bad image, and the younger sister had an incredibly stupid image.

It wasn't like this in April or May.

When did it get to this… this kind of image? Even though I had intended on always being an exemplary brother for my sisters.

"What is it. Do you need something, Karen-chan?"

"A very good question, but not an appropriate one."

Her attitude was infuriating.

She completely lives her life with ease.

"The correct question to be asked is, 'When should we go?', you see."

"Don't talk with the assumption that I've agreed to help you and I'm going to accompany you somewhere. Even if you deduce that somehow, there's no way that a response that's so esper-like is correct! Take your enormous chest off my head right now and answer my question. Do you need something?"

"Let's see, do I need something. But you already know what it is, don't you?"

>"Okay, you don't need to say anything. Just take your enormous chest o"<

"Fine. I'll surrender this time, for your sake."

She surrendered.

Well, even if I called it enormous, it was hardly on the level of Hanekawa's, and based on their sizes proportional to their heights, she didn't even compare.

"Now, don't touch your sister's boobs so much, onii-chan. In return for that, I'll have you listen to what I have to say. Since you took advantage of my boobs, I'll take advantage of this conversation!"

"I don't know what you heard from Tsukihi-chan, but in this case none of it has anything to do with me, all right? You're the one who's arbitrarily taking advantage of me in both ways, all right?"

"I never thought you would say it was arbitrary. I thought that instead of 'honesty is the best policy', it was 'boobs are the best policy' for you?"

"Please don't apply a proverb to me in such a nonsensical way, Karen-chan."

It seems I had no choice but to take a break from studying—but oh well. If she had something she needed to discuss with me, then I really couldn't stop her from doing so.

Well, ever since July's con man incident, being able to see her coming to her brother for help instead of doing everything by herself and rampaging about made me feel as if she had experienced some growth.

"So what is it? Tell me already."

"You want me to tell you? I~ guess~ I~ have~ no~ choice~."

She was acting as if she had won.

This was not the behavior a person asking for help should have, but since I was no match for my brawny sister, I decided to overlook it.

“The truth is, I want you to help me.”

Though she had lessened her behavior from being grandiose to something more humble, since her body was pretty large to begin with, the impression I got probably wasn’t very different.

“Help you? Oho. Dear me. Oh, Karen-chan, it’s impossible for people to help other people. One can only choose to be helped on their own.”

“Ew, don’t spew out such meaningless nonsense at me or I’ll punch you.”

A complete turndown.

Or rather, it almost turned into a complete throwdown.

Well, it’s not like it wasn’t my fault for going with the flow and bringing out a principle that was not mine but Oshino’s, but still, how could my sister be this coercive?

“Stop saying all that boring stuff and listen to what I have to say, you idiot. Want me to beat you up a bit?”

She began to crack her knuckles.

This wasn’t coercion; this was subjugation.

I was about to be silenced.

And so, I tried to maintain some of my dignity as an older brother.

“All right, I’ll listen,”

I said.

“I’ll listen, so spit it out already. Quickly.”

“Ehehe, whee, all right!”

She suddenly switches back to being a simple-minded sister.

Her moods are on the level of a roller coaster.

“Thank you, onii-chan, I’m so happy! As thanks, I’ll let you peek at my boobs while I talk! Peek! Peek!”

“……”

It’s almost like a wild animal is living in the same house as I am.

No matter how hard I study for the entrance exams, I might still fail because someone like her is so close by. To think that the one thing that would hold me back was my closest relations…

“Now, onii-chan! Feel free to feel up these legs while you listen! They’re long, slander legs!”[5]

“Are your legs saying bad things about people? It’s slender. And I’m not going to feel you up! If you don’t want me to become the taciturn kind of character, then talk about whatever it is already!”

“It’s about a tree,”

She said suddenly.

There was absolutely no context.

Or rather, she didn’t even make any preparations to start her story—in combat, this was an exceptionally high-level technique, but in conversation, it just meant she was bad at pacing.

I came to painfully realize the difference between pacing yourself in a story and pacing yourself in a marathon.

But if I couldn’t follow her pacing, then I’d probably come to painfully realize a different kind of pain, so I said,

“Oh, so it’s about a tree, huh? I see, I see,”

And assented seriously.

I really flattered my younger sister.

That was me: a man who would never hesitate to flatter his younger sister in order to meet his objectives—even if I make it sound cool, the objective really only happens to be 'because I don’t want to be hit’.

The 'A’ in Araragi stands for adulation![6]

“Even someone as great as you will come to me to talk about a tree, huh.”

“Thunderbolt Punch!”

As a result of flattering her, I was hit.

Even if she was an idiot, she could still understand when I was making fun of her.

“A punch that strikes with the power of static electricity: that is the Thunderbolt Punch!”

“Oh come on, you’re really just using the power of your muscles!”

“A tree was discovered at our dojo, and everyone else is treating it as if it was in the way. That’s why I want to do something. But I don’t have that kind of power, onii-chan. So you do something! I know you’ll be able to pull something off! I believe in you! So you better live up to my expectations, all right? Do it!”

“……?”

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[5] Confuses 'kyokusenbi (linear beauty)' with 'kyakusenbi (beautiful legs)'

[6] The 'A' in 'Araragi' shares the same kanji as flattery/adulation. Still kind of works in English.

As I recall, the words 'fluent' and 'eloquent' would normally be used to refer to the kind of people with a flowing manner of speech, such as lecturers or rhetoricians, but the 'fluency' that Karen had just embodied gave me the feeling of having cold water being poured upon me.

I just didn't understand…

"What, you don't get it? You really are dense, onii-chan. You should just tell me if you need to look at some boobs for motivation."

"Do you perhaps think that I'm like the Turtle Hermit or something…?"

"Ahaha. There's no way I'd call my big brother something as good as Master Roshi. Well, if you took all the power away from Master Roshi, then I guess you'd be left."

"What's left when you take all the power away from the Turtle Hermit?"

"Won't the turtle be left?"

"Leave the hermit instead!"

Still, for the time being, since it was so pitiful for me as a brother to not understand what my sister was saying, I decided to put more effort into interpreting her words.

"A tree was… discovered at your dojo? Um, do you mean those wooden boards that you break in karate?"

"No. What a cruel thing to say! Want me to reshape the contours of your body?"

"You're the one saying cruel things… You think I'd let you do that!?"

"Let's see… So there's the dojo, you see? Like this."

While gesturing, Karen began to explain. I didn't think it would be necessary to use gestures to explain that 'the dojo was there', but the fact was, it made absolutely no sense.

No.

The details were irrelevant; what mattered the key points.

I wasn't really sure how she was describing the dojo, but to put it simply, there was a dojo, right? And that dojo was the one that Karen always went to, where she went to learn to fight?

I got that much, at least.

"It's a dojo with around fifty years of history. It's huge, and looks kind of anteek."[7]

"Right now, I feel like you have the spelling of 'antique' wrong… but whatever. So what about the dojo?"

"No, the dojo has nothing to do with it."

"Huh?"

[7] Actually writes it in hiragana instead of kanji

What was she saying? Could it be that with the pretense of a discussion, she was actually trying to hinder my efforts to study? Was the kind of doubt that rapidly entered my mind, but…

“It’s the backyard of the dojo.”

“Backyard…?”

“Not backhand, backyard.”[8]

“Don’t assume I’m familiar enough with the term backhand to confuse the two!”

“In the past, I used to think that backhand was an incredible kind of martial art. Like, there was a front kind of martial art, and then behind all that was the back kind, that was more hidden and mysterious. To think that it was just a single attack… Whoa, that was close, onii-chan, don’t change the subject! I’m talking about backyards, not backhands!”

“Aren’t you the one mixing them up?”

Her explanation was incredibly bad.

I gradually started to want to have her draw a picture instead.

“So there’s a yard behind the dojo. And. We discovered a tree there!”

“And what I’m not getting is what you mean by you discovered it… Like, you discovered some branches that had fallen in the backyard or something?”

“You really don’t understand anything, do you? I never said anything about that. It’s because all you think about are boobs that your eyes are like that. Don’t look at your sister with those eyes!”

“I’m not looking, and regardless, all that’s in my head right now is concern for my sister!”

“Ehe, thanks for being so concerned for me!”

She suddenly became cute.

She really only listens to the good things.

“It’s not branches. And it’s not boards to break either. It’s a growing tree. A tree with roots in the ground!”

“Hm?”

“No? Do you still not get it?”

“Er, I think I understand, but…”

In understanding, it made even less sense.

Or rather, it was just incomprehensible.

[8] This pun is translated pretty closely: 'backyard' in JP uses the kanji from 'hand', which is the source of confusion.

I had thought that, one day, some unidentified wood had fallen into the dojo's backyard, or perhaps was placed there, or brought in there, but—a growing tree? A tree with roots in the ground?

"Let me think this through, Karen-chan."

"Huh? You don't have to."

"Let me! Basically, in the backyard of the dojo you go to, a tree was growing… and you hadn't noticed that it had been growing there?"

"It's not just me! There's no way someone else would be able to notice something that I didn't notice!"

"There's no way… What's with that self-confidence?"

"It was everybody! Including my master, who owns the dojo, everyone noticed just recently that a tree was there—in training, we don't just stay indoors, but harden ourselves outside as well."

"Uh huh… Well, training karate outdoors makes sense, too."

But… If they had been using that backyard—the story became even stranger.

Didn't that mean that the backyard was used quite often?—And even so, nobody noticed a tree was growing there?

"So, the other day, I discovered it. 'Huh? Had there always been a tree here?' I said."[9]

"Eh? You can speak formally, too?"

"Don't be so surprised! Of course I can! People that deserve respect are spoken to formally. That's obvious."

"But you've never once spoken to me formally before?"

"Well, yeah, that's why I said people that deserve respect, right?"

She laid it out very distinctly.

Maybe she thought her older brother wouldn't be wounded by this.

"Karen-chan, you don't really need to respect me, but try speaking formally to me."

"Do I have to do something so pointless…? Um, 'Onii-sama, would you like to have a look at my boobs?'"

"I would not. All right, go on."

"So I said, 'Huh? Had there always been boobs here?'"

"You're just dragging it out, aren't you? If there were boobs in the garden that nobody noticed, it would be a huge incident!"

"Even the tree is a huge incident. Anyway, nobody had noticed. Eh? What's this? Did someone plant it here overnight? We were all talking about it, and it was really rowdy."

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[9] Karen uses formal language. Hard to convey in English.

"....."

"Doesn't the word 'rowdy' sound like a good name for a brownie store? Rowdy Brownies."[10]

"When I'm quiet, it's not because I'm bored, so you don't need to force yourself to try and say something funny."

"Doesn't that sound like something that would flourish? Or would you say it might flourish?"[11]

"Just shut up. Um... So what was it actually like? Were there any signs of that having happened?"

"Eh? No, no, I don't know any brownie stores. Do you know any?"

"Not signs of a brownie store. Were there any signs that someone came in the middle of the night and planted the tree there? If someone went to all that work, then it would be easy to tell just by looking at the ground."

"That's right. I bet it would even be easy for you to tell."

"Are you relying on me or looking down on me?"

"I'm looking down on you while relying on you!"

"That's really skillful of you, isn't it."

"There weren't any signs. The tree was really rooted in deep. There weren't any traces of digging or planting. Although it's not like the master or any of the students are soil or plant specialists, so we're not a hundred percent sure, but from what we could see, it was a tree that had been there since a long, long time ago. Almost a few decades old—a really anteek-looking tree."

"Hmm..."

This girl, not only did she not know how to spell antique, was she also treating it as another word for 'old'?

How in the world are her school grades so good, then?

She's really clever, isn't she.

"But, you know... It's kind of scary. Despite using that backyard for all this time for training and stuff, nobody ever noticed that a tree had been growing there—"

"That's exactly it, onii-chan!"

Bang!

Karen hit the floor.

I almost thought she was trying to punch a hole in the floor of my room.

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[10] Really obtuse pun. 'tenyawanya(boisterous)' reminds her of tenpura store. 'ten(tenpura)ya(store)wan(bowl)ya(store)'

[11] Going off the previous pun, the 'han' in 'hanshou(flourish)' is replaced with 'han(rice)'

“That’s what everyone else is saying! What, so you were on their side all along!”

“No, no, I’m on your side, you know?”

I immediately placated my sister.

It’s almost starting to become a bad habit.

I practically have no dignity as an older brother.

“So? What exactly are they saying, Karen-chan?”

“So you know, everyone’s saying that it’s scary. Well, not scary, more like ominous or something. Obviously Master doesn’t say anything like that, but my less disciplined seniors and juniors are, like, getting the shivers and stuff!”

“……”

She lumped her seniors and her juniors into one…

If this girl spoke formally to anyone other than her master, it was probably only a few people…

“Ominous… may be an overstatement, but do you not understand where those people are coming from?”

I don’t know if this was a good example, but it could be like when you’re cleaning your room and you happen to find a book in your bookcase that you’ve never seen before.

A book that you don’t remember buying, let alone reading.

If something like that seemed like it had been in the bookcase for a long time—then, even if it wasn’t obvious, it would still make you feel weird.

“Oh. So you are on their side after all. You’re allying with the likes of them, huh?”

“Allying with the likes of them… You’re saying this pretty enthusiastically and all, but it’s not like I know a single person out of the the likes of them…”

“Why are you believing in people you don’t know? Believe in me instead! Are you saying you trust the words of strangers over mine!?”

She was enraged.

What a scary sister. And on top of that, what a stupid sister.

Isn’t scary and stupid the worst combination?

I don’t want to seem like I’m asking too much, but be a little bit more moe.

“At least believe in both sides equally!”

“Okay, okay. I’ll believe in both sides equally… But basically, you don’t agree what they’re saying is what it is, right?”

“Eh? What?”

She gave me a blank stare.

“Huh, what were we talking about again?”

“Don’t forget that! Don’t forget the topic of the conversation that you yourself brought up! So the fact that the tree had been growing without you noticing wasn’t ominous to you?”

“Nope. I was surprised, but I wasn’t scared. I eat a lot of chicken gizzard, so I won’t get scared even in a test of guts!”

“The guts in a test of guts refers to your heart, you know.”

“Don’t worry! When I eat gizzard, I usually eat it with the heart, too!”

Speaking of which, she does eat a lot of that, doesn’t she.

She really loves the internal organs.

“Rather, as a martial artist, it’s almost embarrassing that I never noticed something like that for all this time. It’s so embarrassing I could almost kill myself!”

“Your martial artist mentality is way too weak!”

“I thought everyone else would feel the same way, but I was wrong. Since nobody felt that way.”

Completely ignoring my straight-man retorts, Karen said that with lonely eyes that weren’t like her at all. No, it’s not that they weren’t like her, it’s that she wasn’t the kind of person that would make those eyes. That probably meant—to her, this was a bigger shock than I thought it was.

“They said—because it’s scary, they’re going to chop it down.”

004

So as a result, we were at the aforementioned dojo’s backyard.

Karen had taken my arm and brought me here.

And I didn’t mean figuratively taken my arm—our arms were linked the whole time as we were comingn here.

It would’ve been fine if we looked like a close older brother and younger sister, but in reality, we probably looked like a ‘close older sister and younger brother’. Since Karen was actually taller than me.

Incidentally, the reason I linked arms with her—that is, the reason she made me link arms with her—was so 'I couldn’t run away from her’, which meant that being 'close’ was far from the truth.

Well.

There’s been a precedent for breaking a promise with Karen and running away, so it’s not like I didn’t understand why she would want to do that, but in this case, I didn’t even want to run away from her.

It wasn't that I was utterly convinced by Karen's intense, emotional words—but the idea of a 'tree that had grown without being noticed' caught my interest.

...It definitely wasn't an escape from studying.

"Hm..."

As I had told Karen, I had gotten the impression from her story that the tree would be much larger, but it wasn't what I was expecting—but even so, even if it was a rather old tree, it didn't seem like something that people could overlook.

It didn't seem so—but the truth was that it was. If I only had Karen's word to go off of, then I would simply think that my sister was just a careless person and the case would end there, but because the other students and even the dojo's master said as such...

"You were the first one to notice the tree, right?"

"That's right! Praise me, praise me! Pat my head~"

"Unfortunately, you're so tall that I can't reach."

"I'm not that big..."

"In other words, when you were training, you were the closest to this tree, right? In that case, if the tree was hidden by your height, then that could explain why it was never noticed, right?"

"Like I said, I'm not that big!"

Karen moved to stand in front of the tree.

Though of course a part of the trunk was hidden, that didn't mean the tree couldn't be seen—it was a few meters tall, after all.

There was not a single leaf on the tree—I couldn't judge whether that was because of the season or if it was simply out of the life force needed to produce leaves... But considering the size of the tree, it seemed like it could be seen from outside the fence as well.

Thinking that, I asked Karen about it.

Karen shook her head.

"Nope. I go a different route, anyway. I may have seen it... but I don't think I've ever been conscious of it,"

she responded.

"I see... Well, it's not like people normally look into the yards of other people's houses and take notices of their trees..."

"Yup. I think it's the same even if you're inside or training. That might be why nobody noticed until now. But then that would mean we just weren't paying attention, doesn't it?"

Karen said with her back against the ree.

"We never noticed because we weren't paying attention—and once we finally notice it, we say it's ominous and want to chop it down—isn't that unreasonable?"

“Well…”

To be honest, I could understsand why they wouldn’t want to 'chop it down’. But at the same time, it was natural for Karen to think that that was 'unreasonable'—that is to say, regardless of whether it actually was 'unreasonable’, it was natural for Karen to think that.

Both sides had their points.

From a third party’s perspective, I could only say that I understood the feelings coming from both sides—but the important point here is that the position I was currently at was not a third party’s.

Though of course it’s a case by case basis.

Right now, my position was as Karen’s brother—or that’s where I wanted to stand.

“All right. Since it seems you were telling the truth this time, I’ll hear you out.”

“What, were you doubting me, onii-chan? That’s rude, was there even a single time I ever lied to you?”

“If you count only the obvious lies, it comes up to two hundred ninety-three. The first time you lied was when you were two, when you broke one of my toys.”

“I don’t know if I should say that you have an amazing memory, or that you’re kind of petty, or that you’re kind of short…”

“There’s no reason for you to call me short!”

Regardless, let’s go to the main problem.

The current situation was that we were intruding in someone else’s home—to Karen, it was a home she was well acquainted with, but to me, it was a stranger’s home that I had come to for the first time and didn’t know my way around.

It was hard for me to calm down.

“So basically, what you want to do is settle this somehow to keep this tree from being chopped down, right?”

“Yeah. So use your political power somehow, onii-chan.”

“Don’t rely on your brother’s political power!”

“If I want to be a bit more shameless… but if you want to say 'keep this tree from being chopped down’, then it makes it sound like it’s okay if we just replant it somewhere else. But that’s forbidden.”

“Forbidden?”

For someone asking for help, she’s pretty poor with her choice of words.

Why make it sound like you’re setting terms and conditions or something?

“That just makes it seem like we’re getting rid of it, and I don’t want that. So what I want is for this tree to stay here forever, just the way it is.”

“Forever, huh…”

At this rate it seemed like the tree was going to die anyway, so that 'forever’ seemed like a pretty difficult goal to reach… But conversely, replanting a tree this old somewhere else seemed pretty difficult as well.

The only way to preserve the tree would be to leave it here—putting aside political power or whatever.

“From what you said, it’s not like your master finds this tree ominous or anything, right?”

“My course! He’s of master, you know?”

“You’re mixing your words up.”

“Of course! He’s my master, you know?”

“Don’t just correct yourself and pretend nothing happened. But anyway… Couldn’t you just ask your master to persuade the other students that find it ominous?”

“It’s not that easy. Even though Master doesn’t find it ominous, he’s still a master of martial arts. The only thing he can think about is kicking the tree down.”

“……”

What an incredible person.

Instead of chopping it down, he’ll kick it down?

Well, it does seem hard from a student’s point of view to make someone like that feel sorry for a tree…

“From his point of view, if we got rid of the tree, then the training area grows bigger, too. Even if it’s not ominous, he still thinks that it’ll be good if we get rid of it. But even so, it’s not like I didn’t want to ask him for help. So I somehow managed to keep him from kicking it down.”

“Is that so?”

“It’s not like I would ask you and not Master for help!”

“Is that so…”

“But it’s impossible to stop the other students. They’re all just rash, and it’s not like they’ll just shut up and obey Master’s orders.”

“Hmm… Then, how about, instead of from a higher position like your master, you try to persuade everyone as a fellow karate student?”

“Also impossible. I’d do it if I could. I’m not going to bow down to them if I didn’t even want to bow down to you!”

“So you didn’t even want to, huh…”

She’s really hurting her older brother, bit by bit.

It feels like she’s lowering the gauge little by little.

“But on the other hand, if I could persuade everyoone else, I’d be able to persuade Master as well—at least, that’s what Master told me.”

“Oho…”

“To be precise, what he said was 'if you manage to beat everyone up and force them to change their opinion, then I’ll leave the tree you found alone. I’ll even keep myself from kicking it down,’ but even I think beating everyone up is a little too much.”

“……”

Her master is a bit too combative.

In that regard, it’s a little scary that, for Karen, that was 'too much’ but not 'impossible… However, even though it was Karen’s loss in terms of majority rule, it seems that her master took Karen’s will into account.

Though it was a tree growing in his yard, so normally he should be able to do whatever he wanted to it—mm, I guess that means Karen’s his favorite student.

“Well, for me, you’re my favorite sister… Anyway, the proper thing to do would be to try and persuade every other student…”

Rash.

I didn’t really know how rash they would be from what Karen said, but if I assumed everyone had some confidence in their abilities, it wouldn’t be easy.

Rather, instead of meeting everyone one by one—a better solution would be being able to persuade everyone together.

I decided to touch that old tree as Karen did—and I felt a 'real’ kind of feeling that I couldn’t understand just by looking at it.

I found myself thinking, this is a living thing.

Just because it had withered… And also, just because it was never noticed until now, wanting to 'kill’ this living thing was something that even I, not just Karen, started to be opposed to.

But putting aside what I was thinking.

“At the very least, you’ll need to clear away the preconception of this tree being ominous. Basically—instead of the tree being an oddity, yokai, apparition, or evil spirit, or any of those things, you’ll have to explain that it’s just a plant.”

“That’s right. I just need to reassure those scaredy-cats.”

“……”

With that hostile attitude, persuading those 'scaredy-cats’ seems like a difficult task…

“Is that so? Then I’ll rephrase. Instead of scaredy-cats, I’ll call them chickens.”

“All I can feel is your ill will! Be nicer to your surroundings!”

“It’s not like I’m on bad terms with them. Normally, we both pay respect to the same school of martial arts. But in this case, they’re chickens. They’re the two chickens in the yard.”[12]

“Although we’re the ones in the yard right now… but anyway.”

Of course, it shouldn’t be too hard to explain that this was just a regular tree—we would just need to examine the cells. And this isn’t anything grandiose, since we can do all that at the school’s science lab.

But it didn’t seem like that was what Karen wanted—and, the 'chickens’ that surround her probably wouldn’t let it go with just that, either.

A scientific examination isn’t likely to clear up physiological doubts—in a false accusation, words can be powerful, but any sort of proof of innocence may appear to be the proof of the devil.

To me.

To me, I understood that this was not an oddity but a simple old tree, but—but there was no way for me to convey this to other people.

And if I wanted to be picky, then it wasn’t as if my senses were always right. Rather than it being the proof of the devil, it would be the proof of a vampire—well, in that case, I could just get confirmation from Shinobu in the end.

“Karen-chan. Why do you think nobody noticed this tree for so many years? Don’t you think explaining it all with the inexperience of martial arts is a bit unreasonable?”

“I don’t think so~.”

“Oh…”

It couldn’t be helped if she didn’t think so, but if I could 'invent’ a more logical explanation for it, then that could help in persuading the other students. I used the word 'invent’ as if I was some sort of con man, but thinking about it realistically, the reason this tree’s existence was not spotted simply stops at inattentiveness to one’s surroundings—if not inexperience.

No, even inattentiveness was too much of a word.

Because, if you think about it, it’s completely natural for trees to be seen in yards—it was the same for Kanbaru’s house, and in a place with a similar atmosphere like this one, they had the option of simply accepting the tree as scenery, with no need for actually being conscious of it.

It wasn’t inattentiveness or inexperience.

Everyone simply just didn’t worry about the tree—until Karen 'identified’ it, it was just barely in everyone’s consciousness.

At least, probably… That’s why Karen, feeling responsible, is going out of her way to defend an old tree that was someone else’s, namely, her master’s.

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[12] A tongue twister in Japanese - 'niwa ni wa niwa niwatori'

“So, what did Tsukihi-chan say?”

“Hm?”

“Don’t play dumb. There’s no way you’d come to me for help and not Tsukihi-chan—what did the other member of the Fire Sisters say?”

“Aah. She talked to me about Washington.”

“Huh? The capital of the U.S.?”

“No, the president.”

“……”

If I recalled correctly, Washington, the first president of the United States, chopped down a cherry tree…

“W… well, I may as well hear what she meant by that.”

“She said, why not just smash it down and apologize?”

“……”

That was Tsukihi when she didn’t care about something…

Tsukihi-chan was the kind of person that stuck her nose in other people’s troubles, but on the other hand, she really didn’t care about the troubles of anyone close to her.

“She didn’t really listen to what you were saying, huh? What would you be apologizing for in this case? What did you do?”

“She said, instead of worrying about what you did and whether you feel sorry or not, just apologize for whatever happens.”

“Tsukihi-chan’s view of life is exposed…”

Although in thise case, if we smashed it down, it was more likely we’d be praised for it—considering that’s what everyone, including the master, wanted.

And I couldn’t help but think of the strength of Karen’s heart—though the people around her, the people that she normally worked with, had a different opinion, she still held to her own opinion.

Not to mention that there was no profit or advantage to be gained from that opinion—the mentality that didn’t fear friction or strife with her surroundings was something that I didn’t have.

But only that.

Though normally it was different, in this situation I wanted to do something to help her—although, that made it seem like I just cared about my sister.

Let’s think of this as a chance to demand gratitude from Karen.

“Kukuku.”

“What’s with that evil expression?”

“Karen-chan. About how much time do we have?”

“Almost none. I think it’ll be taken down tomorrow. Today, they’ll probably be arguing about who’ll be the one to knock it down.”

“Use a saw!”

At any rate, that meant there was no time.

Well, even if there was time, it was better to hurry—if, like Karen, any of the dojo’s students could enter on their own, then it was possible for someone to go wild independently. And since it was a martial arts school where everyone was capable of knocking the tree down without tools—

“In that case, I got it. Karen-chan, feel free to rely on your reliable brother.”

“Really? Then, as thanks, I’ll let you do whatever you like with my boobs!”

“I don’t want to think about doing anything for that kind of reward, so I won’t.”

“You don’t need to be stubborn. Go on, go on~”

“What if I do whatever I dislike?”

“Whatever you dislike!? What do you plan on doing with my boobs!? …and, onii-chan, what are you specifically planning on doing?”

“Ha. I’ll do something or other.”

005

“Do something, Hanekawa!”

“Don’t pass off all your work to someone else…”

That night, I called Hanekawa. I told her everything about the circumstances of Karen-chan’s dojo and the old tree, in order to seek out some of her wisdom.

“I’m all out of energy, I’m at my limit! Help Karen out somehow. There’s no one else to rely on but you!”

“You’re giving up way too easily, aren’t you?”

I heard a sigh from Hanekawa.

Recently, she hasn’t tried to hide her disappointment with me.

“Please! I’ll let you do whatever you like with your boobs!”

“In the first place, my boobs are already mine… but whatever. It’s for Karen-chan, after all. If I think of it as being for Karen-chan and not Araragi-kun, my motivation goes up.”

“So, what do you think, really?”

“Hm? Hmm? About what?”

“Er, first off I’d like to hear what you think about the whole thing—do you support Karen-chan or her other colleagues?”

“That would be Karen-chan, of course. It’s terrible to think of getting rid of a tree that’s still living, without any justifiable reason. Do you think differently, Araragi-kun?”

“Well… Intuitively I thought the same way, but I thought it could be because I’m a related party—that is, regardless of whatever I thought, I could’ve been influenced by a surrounding opinion.”

“That’s right.”

“Eh?”

“Er, that is, everyone around Karen-chan is probably the same way—what I’m saying is, the people that want to get rid of the tree is probably not as big of a majority as you two think. No matter how many people there are, if you can manage to sway the the people that are the opinion leaders, then you’ll probably resolve the matter.”

“Hm…”

That was Hanekawa for you.

There’s a reason I relied on her.

“If you asked me why nobody managed to notice that tree’s existence until now, then I’d think it’s as you said, Araragi-kun—rather than noticing or not noticing, it’s just that nobody was really conscious of it. But when you notice it for just a moment, then you can’t help but really notice it—and it’ll be more noticeable in your eyes than it needs to be. If I had to say it, it would be like Araragi-kun’s bedhead.”

“So it’s like my bedhead…”

If you noticed it, you should’ve told me.

At the moment you noticed it, that is.

“So, when you learn a new word, and you see that word in a sentence, that word seems to stand out more. Something like that, right?”

“Right. Well, I wonder—”

Hanekawa agreed.

“—It would be like, there’s a store on the street that you always go down, but nobody seems to remember it being there, or something.”

“Although I bet you’d remember it.”

“Ahaha, no way.”

Hanekawa laughed.

It almost felt like she deceived me with that laugh.

“And this connects back to the previous point, but it’s likely that there were some people among the dojo’s students that noticed the existence of the tree. But, they got caught up

in the flow of the idea of ‘nobody noticed it until now’, and the atmosphere made it harder for them to speak up. Doesn’t that seem possible?”

“So the people that can read the atmosphere… That seems reasonable.”

“But, even if that applies as a phenomenon, it won’t do as an explanation. Because it’s natural for people to think of it as a mysterious phenomenon, and a mysterious tree.”

“And, also… With so many coincidences piled together, it might be passed down as an oddity story later on, too. It’s hard to predict what kind of stories will thrive in what kind of ways, though…”

The extent that I could reach was to explain it with a theory.

However, the theory was, in the end, just a theory.

It could never rise to anything above that.

“I’d like to confirm something, Araragi-kun. Right now, at that dojo, the situation is a pandemic-like panic, right?”

“Panic is kind of an exaggerated word… But I suppose it is kind of like a mass infection.”

“Then, you just need to bring that to an end.”

“Hm…? Well, that’s true. But it’s hard to keep a pandemic in check, isn’t it? That’s what’s troublesome.”

“No, there’s a way. A way to stop a pandemic.”

“Rather than a way to stop it, it’s more like a way for it to stop on its own—”

I guess I have no choice this time, she said.

Hanekawa said something that didn’t seem like it was her own will—and when I heard the 'wisdom’ that followed afterwards, I nodded in understanding.

This time, even for me, “You know everything, don’t you?"—was something I couldn’t say.

006

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line.

And yes, I realize that not saying my usual line to Hanekawa is already an unexpected punch line in itself, but either way this is what happened afterwards. To start with the conclusion, the old tree that Karen was trying to protect was, in the end, not chopped down.

Of course, it wasn’t knocked down or kicked down either—it’s still going strong for now. Although, it wasn’t as if it was guaranteed to exist forever—but at the very least, the emergency was prevented.

As for what actually happened,

“In order for a pandemic or a panic to stop—when it arrives at its destination, then it will stop.”

That’s what it was.

When it reaches its goal, it will stop.

In short, no matter the virus, once it spreads until it can’t spread any further, infection will stop, and the situation will naturally begin to resolve itself.

The ecological pyramid is able to preserve itself in this way—but it was pretty clear that, in this case, we couldn’t actually let arrive at its destination. If this pandemic was made to continue to its ‘destination’, then the result would be the disposal of that old tree.

“That’s why, we can simply shift the goal—right now, everyone thinks that the tree is on the 'ominous’ level, right? Or, possibly, a level above at 'scary'—it has up to that level of recognition, right? 'Ominous’, 'fear'—we just need to take it a step further. That will be the goal.”

“A step further…”

“That would be reverence, wouldn’t it?”

Reverence.

An existence to be both feared and respected.

The next day, Karen told all the other dojo students this.

That old tree was made of the same wood as what was used to build the sacred dojo—so it seems that the god that protected the dojo made the tree grow in the backyard.

That’s why—such a bizarre phenomenon occurred.

That was her explanation.

That was the interpretation she told everyone.

“The god of martial arts, who has been watching over this dojo while hiding its presence for decades, used all its strength to make an appearance. It would be outrageous to chop this tree down—”

This fabrication that Hanekawa came up with was adopted almost word for word—but Karen’s personality was not one that allowed her to lie to anyone except to her brother, so before that, I had to deceive Karen.

To begin with, Karen was not the type to believe in oddities, but the month before last, she had experienced something very unusual, so a spiritual setup like 'the god of martial arts that watched over the dojo’ was comparatively easier for Karen to take in.

From the point of view of the other dojo students—including the ones that got caught up in the atmosphere—their opinions and feelings were not negated but followed along to their logical conclusion, with the 'truth’ coming to light, so the panic reached its destination. That is, there was nothing more to it.

Also—

With the truth being what it is, there's no way they'd think to hurt the tree.

Of course, this wasn't a lie meant to fool Karen's master. Though we hadn't bothered to look into it, if you considered it normally, there was no way the wood used to build the dojo was the same as that old tree.

"But, the master probably won't point that out—he'd probably read the atmosphere. As promised, Karen-chan did manage to persuade the others, after all."

It seemed that's how it happened.

Well, it seemed that Hanekawa was right when she predicted that it would be unlikely that the panic that encompassed the dojo, which had finally come to an end, would occur once again—and with that in mind.

For now, that old tree's life was tethered—Karen, having been the one to 'discover' the tree, took the responsibility of protecting it to the end.

"But no matter what, telling a lie makes you feel bad…"

After borrowing her wisdom, I most likely did not have the qualifications to cheer Hanekawa up, but I couldn't help but give her this consolation.

"But it's not necessarily a lie."

"Hm?"

"It's possible that that tree could actually have been an oddity. Though I don't know if it was a protector god or what… but it could have been an oddity that kept its presence hidden, unable to be noticed by people. In the first place, it's not like it's completely impossible for it to be the same wood used to build the dojo. The probability isn't zero."

"Aha. What are you talking about? The probably of that is still way too low."

"Just because it's low, doesn't mean it's not possible. Also—"

Wait.

Whether it was for consolation or not, I may have said a bit too much.

"—because we created an explanation like that, it's possible that tree may have actually become an oddity, you know? A kind of oddity that watches over those undergoing training."



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

10
October

Koyomi Tea

001

As for the second of my two sisters who goes by the name Araragi Tsukihi, I don't really get the impression that she's walking on a path—and I'm not saying this as if I had some cool nuances in mind like she was walking a path that didn't seem like a path, or she was actually trailblazing a new path. If I had to describe it, it would be that she was freely flying through the sky as she moved on through life.

It's my personal opinion as her brother.

Although it's not something I've spoken about to anyone.

But I doubted that the majority of the people around her thought that Tsukihi, who would wander about like a bird, was such an evasive character.

That she was evasive, without drive.

By the way, as everyone already knows, birds fly in the sky—but what's really interesting is that even before they flew, they already possessed the capability to fly, in what's known as pre-adaptation.

Well, it sounds obvious in that they never would have flown if they never had that capability—but if you think about it, it's kind of a strange idea. Even before birds could fly, and even before they split off from reptiles, they had already been prepared to fly.

Instead of evolution, could it be called a latent talent? If they had realized that the day would come when they would fly, and steadily prepared for that—evolution is supposed to be natural selection that occurs by adapting to the circumstances, but this would be predicting the circumstances that were going to occur and adapting in advance.

It seemed that Tsukihi was able to recall that shrewdness and aptitude—really, on top of her seeming like her feet were off the ground, she did seem like a bird.

Even though it seemed pointless to ask someone like her about it, I still asked her anyway.

Tsukihi-chan, what sort of path do you walk?—that is, even if it's not on the ground, there should still be a path in the sky.

There should still be a course.

Even an airplane follows a set schedule and a set course, flying through the route that was decided beforehand—taking into consideration the wind direction and air resistance. So even for someone who floats as lightly as her, there should still be some guideline, or at least some concept of a path.

That's why I asked, but.

However.

"There are no paths in the sky, onii-chan."

Tsukihi responded like so.

“Even if there were, I’d ignore them. It’s impossible for me to do things exactly as they were decided on.”

She was an even more dangerous person than I had thought.

At the very least, if she was an airplane instead of a bird, I have no doubt that she would cause a birdstrike.

002

“Onii-chan, welcome back~.”

“Oh, I’m back.”

“You’re early~. I have some snacks; do you want some~?”

“Snacks? Oh, sounds nice. I’ll have some.”

“There’s tea, too~.”

“You’re pretty thoughtful, aren’t you?”

“There’s something I want your advice on, too~.”

“Ah, then I’ll go for that too… er, wait.”

Along those lines, I was, little by little, made to listen to Tsukihi as she consulted me. With the flowing pace of the conversation, it was truly an uncommon tactic… But really, in this case, it was all due to my carelessness.

To be courteous with my sister—what a mistake.

Anyway, it was a certain day in October, when, after just returning home from school, my negligence was aimed at.

In the living room of my house, as I partook in the snacks and tea that Tsukihi prepared, I found myself being consulted by her—like with Karen last month, and like old times, my sisters finding the time to communicate with their older brother was something that I was proud of, and it would be a lie if I said I wasn’t happy, but it was a bit annoying for someone about to take college entrance exams.

Well.

It was hard to believe that Tsukihi had a problem that was sensitive and required me to be there for her like Karen’s was—as far as I could tell, even allies of justice known as the Fire Sisters were something that Karen mostly led and Tsukihi mostly followed along with—so I was sure that this was a trivial matter.

I could almost have declared that it would be resolved before I was finished with my tea and snacks—it seemed that she had brought them from her school’s Tea Ceremony Club, as they seemed like genuine tea cakes.

As I wondered whether snacks like these could be grouped together with other sweets, I showed little regard for etiquette as I picked them up randomly and muched on them.

Although, I can't say I ignored etiquette when I didn't know it in the first place.

"So, onii-chan. Onii-nii-chan."

"Don't call me something weird."

"I tried adding more respect. Since I'm asking you for advice and all."

"For just a short moment, though. Well, I'll at least help you enough to be worth these stylish snacks. But will you be able to handle your older brother?"

"Onii-chan, do you believe in ghosts and stuff?"

"Ghosts?"

Between believing and not believing, most people would normally respond by saying that they didn't believe. Although there were some people who lied while they ate donuts.

"What's with that. Did you hear something from Sengoku?"

I had no idea how much I wanted to step into this conversation, so I asked something like that to probe.

Whether it was a con man or whatever, with Tsukihi's information network, it wasn't hard to get a glimpse of what went on in this city for the past six months—although getting a glimpse was different from swallowing it.

But, being slightly different than Karen, Tsukihi herself was a realist—no matter how much she seemed like a bird, it was hard to believe she would swallow things like 'magic charms'.

"? Why is Nadeko-chan's name coming up? Onii-chan, sometimes you say things that make no sense."

As usual, she tilts her head to the side.

As I sighed in relief at hearing that, without realizing that I was sighing in relief, I said,

"No, never mind. But why are you suddenly asking about ghosts?"

And reversed the question.

"What, is it something like a ghost appearing in the Tea Ceremony Club?"

It wasn't a question I asked with any basis but a continuation of the rebuttal I made to evade my comment about Sengoku—it was a sentence I constructed simply by connecting the snacks that Tsukihi brought from the Tea Ceremony Club and her use of the word 'ghost'.

But this was, surprisingly, right on the mark.

My intuition was not something to be messed with—to be honest, I really wanted to test the sharpness of my intuition on a scantron. Since there's never been a case where filling in a scantron randomly has ended up being completely correct.

“That’s right! I’m surprised you figured it out so quickly.”

“Eh? What do you mean, that’s right?”

I ended up reacting like that after Tsukihi’s approval. With a reaction that seemed like I had forgotten what I had just said, I was really bird-brained. You could say I was Tsukihi’s brother in more ways than one.

“Like you said, a ghost is appearing in the Tea Ceremony Club!”

Tsukihi said.

She had recently changed her hairstyle to twintails, and she fiddled with those twintails as she spoke. I had told her to stop having her hair in twin tails, but Tsukihi wasn’t the kind of sister to listen to what her brother said.

“—Or rather, it’s more correct to say a ghost /appeared/ in the Tea Ceremony Club.”

“More correct…?”

Of course, it wouldn’t exactly be correct right at the moment the ghost appears, but either way, I’ll keep quiet and listen for a bit longer.

To Tsukihi, I said,

“Hmm, so?”

and prompted her for more.

Since there was plenty of tea and snacks left, I wasn’t reluctant to go along with her story for now. Fortunately, unlike Karen, Tsukihi was actually pretty good at conversing—and it was unlikely that listening to her would cause me any stress.

“So, a ghost appeared!”

“What do you mean by it appeared? Were there traces of it left in the club room?”

“No, I wouldn’t say it left any traces… There’s no objective evidence that that kid was there.”

That kid?

That’s a strangely specific way of referring to it.

“Tsukihi, I’ll tell you about something good. If there’s no evidence, that means there was no ghost! Yup, that settles the matter. We can just chat about something else now.”

“Hey!”

Tsukihi took an offensive action against her brother. It was an attack consisting of three-color ballpoint pens that were on the table—unlike Karen, she had never learned any hand-to-hand combat, so she did not hesitate in using violent weapons to attack.

I had only just managed to get Senjougahara to completely stop using stationery as weapons… But there was another form of weapons madness hiding so close to me.[13]

[13] Both weapons and madness are pronounced kyouki.

It’s really scary.

To think that someone who could get arrested if reported was one of my relatives… Fortunately, as I had many years of experience as her brother, I easily dodged those ballpoint pens.

It was a backwards bend that I knew would never be of any use in the future, although I didn’t want to be in a future where something like that would be useful anyway.

“I want this to be a proper consultation! Not some idle chatter!”

“Okay, okay… Calm down. I get it, so put those pens away.”

“Put them away? Which color pen are you talking about?”

“All of them! Red, blue, black, all of them! So, what were we talking about again? There’s no evidence for the ghost that you say appeared in the Tea Ceremony Club?”

“That’s what I said! Weren’t you listening?”

“Weren’t /you/ listening? If there isn’t any evidence, then there can’t be a ghost, right?”

I didn’t think that was something I had to repeat, but even with my wisdom, it was likely I needed to say something more than once for my stubborn sister.

“As I see it, aren’t you the one that proved the fact that there was no ghost?”

“Wow. How’d you figure that out?”

Tsukihi looked greatly surprised.

Her reaction was refreshing.

If her reaction was just a little bit off then it would seem forced, so her knowing the line without crossing it was something I could praise my sister for.

“As expected of onii-chan, you’re a genius!”

“Oi, don’t say I’m a genius. This is the result of my hard work.”

I may have crossed a line and let the praise get to my head.

Well, in this case, instead of this being the result of hard work, it’d be more due to the experience I had as her brother—I more or less had an understanding of what Tsukihi was capable of.

She was scary in that I didn’t know what she might perpetrate, at the same time I was aware of the fact that 'I didn’t know what she might perpetrate'—her randomness was high, but there was an obvious trend.

And if I could sense the trend, then I could keep it in check… Karen was similar in that respect, but what made Karen more bothersome was that, even if I tried to keep her in check, her speed and power was way beyond mine, and any sort of 'road closed’ sign held no meaning for her.

Someone like her would forcibly break through a checkpoint.

Meanwhile, Tsukihi was quite capable of clearing that checkpoint by flying over it—well, to catch flying things, you could always cast a net.

The story probably went something like this.

At Tsuganoki Second Junior High School, where Tsukihi attended, there were rumors being spread about a ghost appearing in the club room of the Tea Ceremony Club, along the lines of a 'school ghost story' or perhaps even a 'seven wonders of the school'—Tsukihi, most likely not as part of the Fire Sisters but as Araragi Tsukihi individually, set out to investigate that rumor.

And she resolved it.

In this case, it was probably a bit strange to call the fact that 'there was nothing' a resolution—but she gathered evidence and testimony and proved that no ghost appeared in the Tea Ceremony Club.

There was no ghost in the Tea Ceremony Club.

She came to that sort of conclusion—however.

Using my intuition that allowed me to guess correctly the part about a ghost in the Tea Ceremony Club, I'd stake my honor as a brother that this conjecture was right as well. But, if it was right, then a question would arise simultaneously.

Because if that was the case, then what exactly did Tsukihi need to consult with me about? The problem—or rather, the entire incident had already been brought to an end.

That kid, at least, wasn't there—it had left.

There was enough of a conclusion.

It could easily be finished with a "Tsukihi-chan, you're amazing!"

If that was the case, did she want praise from me?

It was embarrasing for me as her brother to praise her... If that was the only way I could put an end to the situation, then, though I didn't know about before, I wasn't opposed to it.

"As expected of Tsukihi-chan, you're a genius!"

"Er, that's not it, I'm actually a little troubled here."

I thought that if I praised her in the same way, then perhaps she might react in the same way, but she didn't—rather, Tsukihi had a troubled expression.

"What do you think I should do, onii-chan?"

"Huh? About what?"

"So—like you figured out, I was able to logically explain the fact that there was no ghost... but nobody believes it."

Everyone.

Believes in the ghost instead of believing in me.

Tsukihi said as she sipped her tea.

003

There's a game called Square.

Well, it lacks a bit in entertainment value to be called a game, so it's more of a group activity that really can't be considered a game, as you'll see below—anyway, it's a well-known game, and everyone should've heard of it at least once so I shouldn't need to explain it, but for convenience's sake.

The setting that's most often used is a hut on top of a snowy mountain in a blizzard, or something along those lines—the four survivors trapped there play this game.

When you're stuck on a snowy mountain, it's apparently the standard to hear 'If you fall asleep, you'll die!' and slap your cheeks to wake yourself up—although there are various thoughts on whether or not you'll actually die if you fall asleep. For example, you can prevent using up all your energy, and since your metabolism slows down you can preserve your life—regardless, Square is played in that situation, in order to not fall asleep.

Each person stands in one of the four corners of the room—and the game begins. Person A moves to Person B's location and taps on B's shoulder. Using the shoulder tap as the signal, B moves to C's location and taps on C's shoulder. C then moves to D's location and taps on D's shoulder. Finally, when D goes and taps on A's shoulder, it marks one revolution, or one round—and returns to the starting point.

And so the four people continue to go round and round the room and manage to stay awake until morning is how it is—but I don't think I need to explain why that can't be the case.

After all, in the end when D goes to tap on A's shoulder, A won't actually be there—at the beginning of the game, A had moved to B's location.

Since D moved to a corner with nobody there, the game would end—and that's the reason why the game lacks in entertainment value.

But the strange thing is—there's apparently a pattern of this game continuing without stopping.

To play Square, there needs to be five people for the four corners, but since when was there a 'fifth person' playing in the game for the survivors to stay awake until morning?—and once it became morning, the question would be 'This game can't be played with four people. Then, who was the fifth person…?'

It would be unrefined to quip that they should've noticed earlier, or rather no matter how sleepy they were, they should've noticed by the end of the first round, and I should probably withhold the opinion that there's probably a better game to kill time and not fall asleep—if we are to treat this as an oddity, then while it's certainly strange, it's by no means frightening, and it can even be considered a good thing. After all, thanks to that 'fifth person', the lives of the four survivors were saved—

It’s not as if Tsukihi and the others carried out 'Square’ in their tea ceremony club or anything—when I heard that the club had held a kimono fashion show for the cultural festival, I did think that they were a rather extravagant tea ceremony club, but even such a dignified club wouldn’t play such a silly game—but what I thought of after hearing Tsukihi out was that kind of ghost story, the kind where you don’t know from where or from whom it came.

The 'fifth person’.

Though, in this case, the tea ceremony club has seven members, so it would be the 'eighth person'—because the character for 'eight’ (八) spreads out like a fan, it could be a good omen, but I doubt that’s related to the case.

“Er… So in the beginning, there was some witness account of this 'eighth person’ or something, right? And you’re the one who stifled that rumor…”

“I didn’t stifle it or anything. Like I said, there was no such thing as the 'eighth person’ in the first place—it was just a rumor that showed up out of nowhere. As for me, I wasn’t really getting off on the idea that the place I call headquarters is the origin of such a weirdo rumor, so I decided to launch myself into the investigation, onii-chan.”

“……”

With 'weirdo’ and 'getting off on’, her word choice was pretty rough… When I talk to her one-on-one like this, I end up seeing her as some kind of hooligan, or at least thoroughly realize how easy it is, relatively, to handle Karen’s clear-cut personality.

“I’ll skip over the details, but I took that witness account or whatever that started the whole rumor about an 'eighth person’ in the club’ and all the other circumstantial evidence and logically refuted them one by one. Logically.”

“You don’t need to emphasize logically. It almost sounds like you’re lying.”

“Are you calling me a liar? How rude!”

Tsukihi’s cheeks expanded.

“What was left after getting rid of all the possibilities that logically didn’t make sense was what was left after getting rid of all the possibilities that logically didn’t make sense!”

“Well that… logically makes sense, I suppose…”

Though the sentence didn’t actually mean anything.

It still wouldn’t make sense even if it wasn’t logical.

“However, even if you stifled the rumors or did an investigation, isn’t this a pretty big commotion? It’s almost like your actions themselves are going to become a rumor. That’s a real match-pump approach, isn’t it.”

“Match-pump? What’s that? What does that mean?”

“Um…”

It's a little confusing to be asked the meaning of a phrase that I used casually. In my case, it's not as if I have a particularly large vocabulary, and I sometimes use words for their nuances without really knowing the meaning, so there are cases when I find myself making mistakes.

So that my little sister doesn't get a self-satisfied look on her face, and so that I can keep my honor as an older brother, I'll have to explain this properly…

"'Match' is the kind of match you use to light a fire. You know, you strike it and it ignites. And 'pump' is like a water pump—so a match-pump approach is when you start a fire and put it out on your own…"

"I get what a pump is, but what's a match?"

"……"

For her familiarity with matches to be this low… I wonder if it's the generation.

I explained that it was something like a lighter.

Though their structures were completely different, I figured that it would make sense intuitively.

"Hmm… So, it's something like Hanekawa-san, huh?"

"It's more like you. Don't criticize Hanekawa."

"No, no, I'm not criticizing. It's actually something positive! It's really positive. Since I'm being positive for Hanekawa-san, it's positive for me, too."

"Well, I doubt there's no one else that thinks of you as positively as you do…"

"It's so positive that I might even think of myself as Napoleon. Because, basically the match-pump approach means that you're the kind of person that takes care of what they're responsible for, right?"

"……"

She managed to interpret it in a good way.

It made me want to assist in her beheading—since her face had that self-satisfied expression anyway.[14]

If she was really the kind of person that took care of what she was responsible for, then she wouldn't be asking me for advice like this.

…No.

That wasn't quite right. Of course, there have been hundreds of times when Tsukihi has sent me or someone else to clean up after her for some problem, trouble, or disaster, and in that matter she certainly was not someone who took care of what she was responsible for—but in this case, it was different.

The story was already over.

[14] Both interpret and beheading are pronounced kaishaku.

The rumor of the 'eighth person' among the tea ceremony club members had been officially disproved, according to Tsukihi's investigation—so the story was over.

The case was solved.

The tale had ended.

She had—taken responsibility.

What we were doing now—was in spite of all that.

"So you know what I did, onii-chan? You know what this cute, adorable, little-sister-character Tsukihi-chan did?"

"Hold on. Even if you're a little-sister-character, you're only so for me and Karen-chan... To anybody else, you're just a normal girl."

"What are you saying? I'm everybody's little sister!"

"How many siblings are you saying you have...."

That... was scary.

It was a fear that would keep me from sleeping at night.

"No, no. I mean, it would be scary if there were thousands of onii-chan and Karen-chan. Sorry, could you not change the subject, onii-chan? I'm trying to have a serious conversation here."

"Hm."

Considering she was eating snacks as she said that, her actions didn't seem particularly filled with seriousness.

"All right. So, what did this cute, adorable, little-sister-character Tsukihi do?"

"So I thought long and hard about the whole matter, and disproved the existence of the 'eighth person', but when I told everyone, they just said this: 'That might be the case, but whatever.'"

"....."

Whatever.

I see. Even though it wasn't a conversation, I understood the nuance of what was being said—or rather, the feeling that 'it wasn't a conversation' was what Tsukihi was worrying about.

It would become a cause for worry.

"'What Tsukihi-chan says might be right, and that might be the case in theory, but, even so, the "eighth person" might still exist—' is what they keep saying! The rumors just won't stop!"

The first part of what she said was said in a really suffocating tone of voice, as if she was imitating someone or maybe doing an impression, but when she returned to normal in the second part, her exasperation came harder than usual.

Her erraticness was beyond repair.

Since even Senjougahara was able to be reformed, there should have been hope…

"So what do you think? Onii-chan."

Tsukihi, who had stood up in exasperation earlier, had already rapidly returned to a state of calm, and was sitting down when she asked me.

"What do you think I should do?"

"What you should do—"

"What do you think I should do in this situation? How should I put it—I asserted what was right, and got everyone to understand that it was right, and the confrontation, the conflict of opinion, all that's over now, but the circumstances haven't changed at all from before… It's as if what's 'right' has no meaning, and there's no effect. What should I do?"

"……"

What's 'right' has no meaning.

These circumstances have occurred thousands—no, tens of thousands of times—and I've told my sisters this time and time again. To the Fire Sisters that advocate allies of justice and have justice as their policy, I've told them, exhausting my words, sometimes ending up grappling with them, that justice and righteousness could not be used as a wild card for everything to be OK in society.

Well, putting aside whether they understood or not—it appeared that in this case, the argument at the table was something different from that.

This wasn't a collision of two different ideas of justice.

It wasn't a sense of the futility of justice, either.

It was almost as if things like righteousness, theory, and reason were met with apathy or other such empty feelings, and to a person like Tsukihi, something like that was hard to accept.

Well, even though I say a person like Tsukihi, I could say that Tsukihi's way of life was even more empty in a way—

"…For example, how about this? Basically—"

"No, don't give an example."

"At least let me use an example!"

"I'm talking about me, so lumping me in with some other story honestly doesn't make me feel good, you know?"

"How would I know how you feel?"

"It's really annoying. Sometimes, I'd try really hard to appeal to people, but then they'd just respond with 'Ah, things like that happen all the time.' Actually, it's almost always adults that just disregard me because there's some other story that sounds the same!"

“Ah, things like that happen all the time.”

“That’s exactly what I mean!”

“But for example, if someone believed in blood type predictions, then no matter how much you logically debated with them, it would be meaningless—isn’t it something like that?”

While trying to calm down Tsukihi’s indignation with a 'whoa, whoa’, I said this. I wasn’t sure if it was an appropriate example, even when taking into consideration Tsukihi’s words, but it shouldn’t be hard to understand.

“I don’t know how exactly you would logically debate with them, but, well, I guess it could be something like that.”

For now, Tsukihi nodded.

“Something like that has actually happened to me. I’d say, 'Only Japanese people believe in blood type predictions,’ only to get in response, 'That logical way of thinking must mean you’re Type A!’”

“That’s kind of an extreme example…”

It was a pretty big leap in logic.

It could even be similar to those 'charms’ that that con man spread—'rumors’ are such that even while knowing about its premise, a considerable amount of people still take that inconsistent action of believing in it.

And it’s not limited to blood type predictions.

For example, I went to the first shrine visit of the new year, and prayed for good health for the coming year—but it wasn’t as if I actually thought that placing a five-yen coin in the donation box and putting my hands together to pray would actually lead to good health that year.

I wasn’t that religious.

But I still went to the first shrine visit—and stuff like that.

“Tsukihi-chan wonders how bad it is to be treated as a Type B in the blood type personality test.”

“Don’t call yourself Tsukihi-chan. Are you a kid?”

“Even though you’re fine with it when Nadeko-chan does it… But actually, I think there are a lot of Type B or Type AB people that have their feelings hurt by those personality tests. I don’t really have proof, but it’s easy to tell that it’s constructed so that the bad things are said about the minority.”

“Hmm.”

Well, if the personality test actually said bad things about Type A people, then it probably wouldn’t be as popular today.

“I think it was called the labeling theory? Since you’re thrown into these blood type classifications from a young age, your personality ends up developing alongside other people with the same blood type—”

“No, no, the labeling theory is more like this. Type A people are more likely to be seen as Type A. If you learn that they’re a Type A person beforehand, then you’ll see him as a Type A person—but it seems more like you’re putting on a sticker rather than a label.”

“Hm… Well, but in this case, the problem isn’t that they’re completely certain about blood type predictions and blood type personality tests. It’s not that most people believe that they’re true, but that they’re having fun with it because of the entertainment value, isn’t it? Though it’s not particularly problematic…”

Because it did have entertainment value.

In other words, a game of sorts.

That’s why, if you say to people who are enjoying it, 'Only Japanese people believe in blood type predictions,’ then you just seem rude… and it could possibly be seen as harassment.

And it would be the same for astrology and palm reading, or any other kind of fortune telling—we surely were not in some ancient era where people used fortune telling as their compass in life.

“Right. For youkai, ghosts, UFOs, too. As you can see, I’m a pretty rational girl, am I not? I am a girl with a rational and androgynous charm, am I not?”

“I don’t really think you have an androgynous charm.”

“What does androgynous charm mean, exactly, anyway… By the time you get to the level of androgynous, I just end up thinking that you look like the opposite gender. Or does that mean that you could appear to be both male and female?”

After all that unrelated talk,

“At least I’m rational,”

she said.

“Seeing everyone making a racket over this rumor, I reflexively knew that I had to shut it down—and it looked like everyone else wanted that, too, since they cooperated with the investigation itself. But even after all that, when the answer came out, they would just, like, giggle or smirk—something like that.”

“Without even arguing against it, they just ignored you—and continued to make a racket over this 'eighth person’, is that right?”

“That’s right,”

Tsukihi said unhappily.

Well, Tsukihi wasn’t exactly androgynous, and looking at her normally erratic behavior I wouldn’t exactly call her rational either, but with the personality that I knew she had, she probably thought that it didn’t make any sense.

It didn't make sense.

Well, she probably was also exasperated at having her work be treated with total disregard—but more than that, she probably found it baffling.

Why?

For what reason?

Even knowing that it wasn't the truth, why did they not change how they thought about something that was wrong—something that just wasn't right?

Without changing their stance.

Why did they continue to derive pleasure from it, just as they had before?—and, in regards to the fixed stance of her surroundings, Tsukihi herself knows that their stance is hard to change, so, and I'm kind of repeating myself, but what sort of advice could I give to Tsukihi?

That oddity story—that ghost story had already been taken care of with her own wit and charm.

And it couldn't be that she was asking me to persuade the remaining six members of the Tea Ceremony Club of Tsuganoki Second Junior High School. Though my sister, Araragi Tsukihi, was full of absurdities, there was no way she'd be that absurd.[15]

If that were indeed the case then it would become quite an incicdent.

A high school senior would march down to a junior high school and childishly argue with six junior high schoolers… Right, that would be the high point of immaturity, the personification of harassment.

I would certainly get seriously angry, and Tsukihi's standing in the Tea Ceremony Club would probably be the worst it's ever been.

It would be possible that legends would be told of the little sister character not with Monster Parents, but a Monster Brother.

The heroic tale of the Fire Sisters would end there as well.

In that case, though she said she was consulting me, was it that instead of looking for an answer, she was just making idle complaints?

If that was the case, my role here would be done… If I left my seat now, would she brandish her three-color pens at me again?

The expression "brandish her pens" could only be used for Tsukihi, and formerly, Senjougahara…

"Hey, Tsukihi-chan."

I daringly chose to enter the fray—but my weapons weren't ballpoint pens, but my words.

"So, what exactly do you want me to do?"

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[15] The word 'absurd' uses the kanji for 'no tea'. 'Despite being in the Tea Ceremony Club, she had no tea.'

“Eh? What’s with that question, onii-chan? Weren’t you listening to what I was saying?”

“Hey, you don’t need to look so surprised… You don’t need to look so surprised while sounding like you’re going to attack me!”

“Hah!”

The three-color ballpoint pen attack resumed. Though I somehow managed to evade them once again, my skin had come very close to being dyed in three colors.

Although, the structure of ballpoint pens meant it would be impossible for something to be dyed with a single touch… Though I chose to ask a candid question as I thought that leaving my seat would be dangerous, it appeared that in game terms I had been placed under checkmate, as my fate was to be attacked no matter what I did.

“If you say another foolish thing, I’ll encroach on you with these three-color ballpoint pens, onii-chan.”[16]

“Encroach on me with pens however you want, but I’m not going to wait around. Don’t be so roundabout, and don’t try to be intimidating; just give it to me straight, Tsukihi-chan. What do you want me to do?

"It bothers me when you say it like that, but, so, like, I want to hear your opinion. Onii-chan, do you believe in ghosts?”

She returned to her very first question.

That is, that had been her question in the beginning—I had thought that that was a lead-in for the sake of beginning the conversation, a convenient entry into the main topic, but it appears that wasn’t the case.

Or rather.

We had already entered the main topic in the very beginning—everything after that was what was roundabout and perhaps a little frightening, but the main topic itself had been there from the beginning.

After that, I had managed to guess the specific contents behind the matter correctly, so the conversation became a little complicated—but the subject was originally much more simple.

She was asking me for my stance.

This little sister was.

“Hm…”

Somehow, though I had done a lot of thinking to myself, I had never actually answered that candid question out loud.

It was a question that was rather difficult to answer, in the end.

I couldn’t say something careless.

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[16] Both encroach and three-color are pronounced sanshoku.

I couldn’t just say whatever was appropriate to match my sister, because I didn’t know who was listening—the walls had ears, too.

That is, there was a vampire in my shadow.

“What? Why do you look so cornered trying to answer, onii-chan? This is just something you can answer and finish off with a simple 'yes’ or 'no’, you know?”

“No, no, Tsukihi-chan. The problems of the world are not something that can be easily finished off with a simple 'yes’ or 'no’.”

“Is that so? Even if that’s the case, I’m okay with finishing off onii-chan with a simple 'yes’ or 'no’.”

She had prepared her three-color ballpoint pens in advance.

Or I suppose you could call them encroaching ballpoint pens.

Was this an advance notice that I would be attacked by pens depending on my answer?... If that was the case, I wouldn’t have any choice but to match Tsukihi and answer 'no’.

Hmm.

Well, we were almost out of tea cakes, and my teacup had long since been empty, so I may as well shake my head and leave.

I had to go and study, anyway.

“It’s 'no’. I don’t believe in ghosts. All the Tea Ceremony Club members besides you are definitely wrong, and I can guarantee that you’re correct, so don’t worry about it anymore. You just stay the way you are, and stay true to your own correctness.

It had been over ten years since my sister Tsukihi was born.

I don’t think I’ve ever had the experience of saying something affirmative in regards to her, but either way I told her that.

In response to that, sure enough, Araragi Tsukihi, who even called herself Napoleon, said,

"You’re right. But it still bothers me.”

“……”

You’re not going to change your mind even if I guarantee that you’re right?

Doesn’t that make you exactly the same as the people around you?

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Didn’t it make her the same?

But, well, it was true that all humans had that aspect to them—like how the world’s problems were not something that could easily be solved with a simple ‘yes’ or 'no’,

people's feelings and emotions were not something that could be solved with a simple 'right' or 'wrong'.

Even if 'correct' and 'incorrect' were indicated, and a person knew that something was 'incorrect', it's still possible for that person to choose that something.

Tsukihi was also in that situation now, and that feeling of "worrying about it even when worrying does nothing" is, surely, something that can't be avoided when you go about your life.

My advice to Tsukihi was, essentially, to realize the idea of "worrying won't do anything so don't worry about it", but, well, while someone capable of realizing that may exist in the world, most people won't be able to.

They'll regret things even when regret will do nothing.

They'll continue to say things even when it has no meaning.

Life is just a cycle of such helplessness.

I remembered the case I took on from Karen last month—the case of an old tree that had quietly appeared behind the dojo. As I thought about it now, I wondered, out of the hundred feelings that thought the old tree was ominous, out of the hundred feelings that were scared of it, how many were there?

Somewhere, they must have thought.

That their reaction that called for chopping down the old tree was a bit excessive—they must have thought that they were going too far.

Even so, those feelings couldn't be stopped. Until it stopped, by Hanekawa's plan—the brakes couldn't be hit.

Changing their feelings.

It wasn't easy to change their minds—almost to the point that I could say it was impossible.

"...Well, saying it like that is kind of an exaggeration, but there are more ordinary examples, too. For example, hyenas have kind of a bad image, right? They have the image of being sneaky animals that scavenge on the prey hunted by lions, right? But in reality, hyenas are animals that hunt on their own, and it's actually more likely for the male lions with manes to skip out on hunting... No, I'm not trying to be conceited by showing off my knowledge. Rather, doesn't this seem like something that would be known without having to look it up, something that everyone would know, something part of general knowledge?—but it doesn't spread. An image that has taken root once, a label that has been stuck on once, continues to stay that way, even after the truth has come to light—even after knowing that the truth is the truth, and that the wrong things are wrong, people continue to live on pretending that nothing has changed. I wonder why?"

"That's because people avert their eyes to things that are inconvenient to them, Araragi-senpai."

To my question, my junior Kanbaru answered as such.

It was the next day at the Kanbaru residence.

To be a little more specific, the next day, I had come to clean up Kanbaru's room, and was currently in the middle of restoring her living space, which was advancing into chaos, back to its original state—and Kanbaru, who had absolutely no intention of helping me today as well, answered as such to me.

"What was it called again again? Senjougahara-senpai had told me about it a long time ago… some sort of bias. People, even during emergencies, will turn their eyes away from inconvenient information, thinking that 'it'll be all right for them'…"

"Er, isn't that a little different? It's not like, in this case, believing in the ghost—the 'eighth person' puts the minds of the Tea Ceremony Club members at ease, or makes them any kind of profit."

"But isn't it more that they find it more fun to accept the ghost without logic rather than deny the ghost using logic? The hyena's image may be a little different, too… But it's probably something like that, too."

Unlike Tsukihi, Kanbaru was someone with which I shared an acknowledgement of oddities—I shared an acknowledgement of demons, monkeys, and possibly even snakes—so a deeper conersation was possible.

"What Senjougahara told you about was probably the normalcy bias."

"Hold it, hold it. Araragi-senpai, you can't just say Senjougahara and call her by her family name! You don't have to try and keep up appearances in front of me. Just call her 'Hitagi' like you usually do."

"I wouldn't call her that except to her directly… Wait, no, I don't even call her that directly!"

"Eh? You don't call her 'Hitagi'? Then was it 'Leggings'?"

"Why would I call someone 'Leggings' when they don't even wear leggings!? Anyway, I don't think it's about whether it's fun or not. Listening to the story, it didn't really sound like the club members were enjoying the rumor of the 'eighth person'."

"What kind of rumor is it, specifically? If the oddity story itself was settled by Tsukihi, then there probably isn't any meaning in hearing—but I might be able to understand something from the details."

Said Kanbaru, from the hallway.

What exactly was she feeling at this time?… To watch with her arms folded in the hallway as her senior cleaned her room for her.

Or do rich people not worry about stuff like that? In terms of the behavior of a king, well, it seems reasonable.

"See, for the case of Karen-chan's dojo that Araragi-senpai told me about before—everyone was able to accept the idea of a 'protective god' oddity, right? What if this 'eighth person' is also something along those lines? Maybe the Tea Ceremony Club's 'eighth person'… is something like the god of the way of tea…"

“The god of the way of tea…”

Who would that be?

If it was the god of tea, or the youkai of tea, then I feel like I might have heard something like it.

“No, it’s nothing like that. I’ve heard a little of it, and though I’m an outsider to the school and I can’t say anything for certain, this ghost story could even be called ominous.”

“Hm. Can I hear the details?”

“……”

She sure is acting conceited.

Was it just a habit from when she was the ace of the basketball club?—even though she isn’t even the ace or a star, just a popular girl!

…that’s still enough, isn’t it.

For a reason to act conceited.

“So it’s just from hearing a little of it, and it’s not like I know all the details… But it’s something like the Tea Ceremony Club adopted a 'school ghost story’ that existed from the beginning. I suppose, rather than adopted, it could be adapted—”

“What kind of ghost story was it 'from the beginning’?”

“If I recall correctly… Right, it’s a ghost story that goes like, the number of classmates increased by one. The class should have been thirty people, but at some point it had become thirty-one… But when you notice it, you would be replaced with that extra person… And, you would have to continue living as the 'thirty-first person’, unnoticed by the rest of the class… While you would have to keep watching as the 'former thirty-first person’ got along with the other classmates…”

“Hm. So it’s a person-replacement-type. Or is it a spiriting-away-type? It certainly is scary.”

Even though she said it was scary, Kanbaru’s attitude didn’t seem like she was afraid at all—well, though it was a 'scary story’, it wasn’t really a story that high schoolers would seriously be scared by.

“Using that ghost story, it seemed like an 'eighth person’ among the members existed, and there was some sort of sign that they existed—so it is different.”

“What kind of story did you think it was?”

“Well, even if it wasn’t a 'protective god’, since it’s a Tea Ceremony Club, it would still be appropriate if there was an oddity like a zashiki-warashi, right? If that 'eighth person’ was a zashiki-warashi, then no matter how Tsukihi-chan denies it, no matter how much logic is used, I would understand if everyone continued to believe it.”

“I see.”

If it was a zashiki-warashi, then that would be the case.

And rather than it being fun, the story goes that if you drive out a zashiki-warashi, then the house falls into ruin—but that wasn't the case here.

Rather, if the subject of the ghost story is something that might replace you with the 'eighth person', and cause your existence to disappear… then instead of swallowing that 'pretense', they should want to deny it.

That would be more advantageous.

"Then maybe instead of the normalcy bias, it might be the sympathy phenomenon. I heard that from Senjougahara-senpai too. If nine out of ten people agree on something, then even if it isn't right or it's unreasonable, the last person that's right and uses logic may actually think he's wrong—it could also be called the pressure of majority rule, and if it's like that then it's harder to change their opinions."

"Majority rule, huh…"

As Senjougahara is someone that lives her life without being swept up by majority rule, it's possible that's why she's so knowledgeable about the theory.

Well, she's always outside the illusion of unanimousness, after all.

"But if that were the case, then I would think the story gets kind of extreme—I would think there'd be at least one person out of the club members that agreed with Tsukihi's opinion."

If that one person existed, then the story would become a lot easier—since there were seven club members, right now, the majority rule would be six to one.

Six to one was indeed a little bit of a disadvantage—but if the ratio became five to two, then it could at least turn into a battle. Once factions form, it would be hard for the system to ignore it.

But since two people still wouldn't be enough, they'd need one more—then it's four to three. Then it would be a proper match.

"…Well, since it won't turn into that, that leaves Tsukihi-chan at a very disadvantageous position right now. It's really stressing her out."

"What kind of mental state is Tsukihi-chan in right now? Even though the illusion of unanimousness hasn't gone that far… But she hasn't started to think that she should join in with the others' opinions because she's tired, has she?"

"The amazing thing about my sister is that she'll never do that."

I suppose you could say that it's the point where she overlaps with Senjougahara's character. But unlike Senjougahara, she actually enjoys group activity itself.

"She's like a more popular version of Senjougahara."

"It might be better not to call your own sister a popular version…"

"Well, it's not like her situation is more pressing than Karen-chan's case. It's not like the Tea Ceremony Club gets broken up, or Tsukihi loses all her friends, depending on whether she accepts or denies the existence of the 'eighth person'—it's just that she's hitting a wall."

“A wall?”

“As someone who advocates justice, being in an environment that ignores something that’s right makes her feel ill at ease—”

No.

It wouldn’t be comfortable for anyone, whoever it was…

“—Situations where the unreasonable or irrational are in control actually happen pretty often, after all. Tsukihi-chan might be too young to understand that right now, though.”

“Too young… We’ve only been talking about Tsukihi-chan and Karen-chan up until now, but Araragi-senpai, how about you?”

“Hm?”

“In this case, which side are you supporting, Araragi-senpai?”

“Er, in this case I’m not supporting or opposing anything… For Karen-chan, I was supporting her, but that’s because, well, it seemed like it was going in a bad direction, so I ended up getting involved and interfering, or something like that.”

“Huh.”

Although it was actually Hanekawa-senpai that got involved, said Kanbaru.

“Her troubles aren’t ending either, huh. Even though it’s the second term. There was that problem with the tiger, too—”

“……”

“Well, it does seem like, from what I can hear, that for this 'eighth person’, whether you should believe in it or not, whether you should affirm it or not, it doesn’t seem like it will do anything in the end—so it’s just a problem of feelings.”

“…That’s right. It’s a problem of feelings—in the end, my sister is very determined. Both my sisters are. Even though I don’t plan on supporting either side, if I was involved in the problem—if I was one of the members of the Tea Ceremony Club, then I’d just try to make sure everyone was on the same page.”

“Huhu. I see. The 'eighth person’ among the club members was actually you, Araragi-senpai, wasn’t it?”

“No, that’s completely wrong! Don’t say things that’ll just make things more complicated. Anyway.”

I tried to put everything in order.

Though I felt bad for Tsukihi, in the end this was just idle chatter—we couldn’t keep talking about this forever, and I figured it was time to move on to the next problem.

“Experiencing irrationality like this can be useful for the future, right?”

“Irrationality, huh? But I think reason has already been hunted down enough—so I’d like to become Tsukihi-chan’s ally.”

“You’ve always been the ally of cute girls, though…”

“No, cuteness has no relation to now. Because if I said that, it’s possible that the other six members of the Tea Ceremony Club might also be cute!”

“……”

What kind of an idea is that?

Have you already assumed the looks of the club members you haven’t even seen yet?

“Is Tsukihi-chan going to be cuter, or are the other club members going to be cuter? You can even call it Schroedinger’s cat!”

“You can hardly call it that! You need to call things more seriously!”

“But, aren’t you like that, too, Araragi-senpai? You and I are—”

From her bandaged left arm to my shadow—in that order, Kanbaru turned her gaze.

“Because we know about oddities. Because we know about the irrational—the unreasonable. That’s why—I want to become Tsukihi-chan’s ally. For Tsukihi-chan, who’s trying to deny oddities—who’s sacrificing herself for reality.”

“……”

“Ah, no, it’s not like I’m trying to deny Shinobu-chan right now, you know? Words aren’t enough to describe Shinobu-chan’s cuteness, so it’s undoubtedly Schroedinger’s little demon!”

“Don’t call her a little demon. You need to undoubt things a bit more properly!”

“Undoubt?”

“Well, anyway—when you say it like that, then I want to agree, but even so, it can’t be helped, can it? There’s nothing we can do about it, is there?

"If you only ask, Araragi-senpai, then I won’t hesitate in marching into Tsuganoki Second Junior High’s Tea Ceremony Club!”

“I’m not going to ask that!”

It may be no trouble for you to go down and argue with a bunch of middle schoolers… but that’s clearly going too far.

We have to settle this without going that far, or in otherwords, peaceably.

Though it didn’t seem like there was any way to calm Tsukihi’s temper—

“Wait, but there is a way!”

“Huh?”

“Basically, if Araragi-senpai’s goal is to butter Tsukihi-chan up, then there is a way!”

“It’s not exactly that I want to butter her up… but is there?”

“Yes! Well, like Araragi-senpai, I also thing that Tsukihi-chan might be a little too young to face that reality—but this solution has one problem.”

“So there’s a problem. It’s not good if there’s a problem… but what kind of problem is it?”

“To get results, we’re going to have to deceive Tsukihi-chan. Araragi-senpai, are you opposed to lying to your sisters in any way?”

“Ha ha ha.”

There was no way I would be opposed.

005

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line.

Well, like I said, Tsukihi-chan had already solved the story of the oddity, so everything had already been over from the beginning—so instead of a punch line, this is more of a bonus.

Using Kanbaru’s idea, I persuaded Tsukihi—you could call it persuading, or you could call it calming her down, but either way it was something along those lines.

Why did Tsukihi’s fellow club members—the other six—continue to obstinately believe in the ‘eighth person’? Even after being pointed to the correct answer, even after being pointed to reason, why did they continue to believe in it based on emotion—in short, if I was *able to explain that*, if I could explain their irrationality, then I could persuade Tsukihi.

So Kanbaru added logic to it. *Everyone was believing in the 'eighth person for Tsukihi’s sake*—was the logic she came up with.

As she had done when she asked me for advice the other day, Tsukihi would often take as she pleased the clubroom’s inventory—the tea and snacks. Well, it wasn’t something to make a big fuss over, but strictly speaking it was not something to be admired—if word got out, then it would certainly be possible that club activities would be suspended.

So, in order to camouflage Tsukihi’s free-spirited behavior—everyone decided to affirm the existence of an 'eighth person’.

That was the reason.

By hypothesizing an 'eighth person’, the rate at which the inventory decreased was consistent.

Though they never planned to conspire against her, in order to protect Tsukihi, everyone recognized that the 'eighth member’ joined the club—

“Is that so! Everyone did it for my sake!”

That idiot was deceived in an instant.

“It was like that, and I just kept saying that there was no such thing as ghosts—but it was actually my attitude that was the ghost, huh!”

She certainly wasn’t clever.

Well, the truth was something completely different—but since she would be satisfied whether this lie was true or not, she had that kind of innocence to her.

“All right, I’ll let myself fall for it!”

I’ll let myself fall for it.

I’ll let the tea be muddied.

Tsukihi said so, and completely forgot about this case—and when I told Kanbaru,

“Hm.”

She said.

“The Tea Ceremony Club members or Araragi-senpai. I wonder which one she let herself be deceived by?”



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

11
November

Koyomi Mountain

001

As for Oshino Ougi, what would she call a path?—up until now, there has never been a moment where she, the niece of Oshino Meme, has spoken to me about a path yet. Though she has talked about intersections and about traffic lights, she's stayed silent in regards to the roads themselves. No, it's possible that she's spoken about them as part of some silly chatter, but if she has, I can't remember it. Mysteriously, I couldn't remember anything she said—and it wasn't just what she said, but her actions, her form, everything about her was hard to remember.

She faded away like the wind.

Like how a wonder lasts but nine days—only something that was concerned with her would disappear as if it never existed.

However.

I can still remember when she spoke not of paths, not of roads, but of road construction—it wasn't a recent conversation, but I can still remember it clearly.

"Araragi-senpai—this might turn into a political conversation, but companies these days are doing maintenance, repair, and construction on roads… They're one part of a machine that drives the economy and creates jobs, right?"

That girl, Oshino Ougi.

Ougi-chan spoke in such a way—a tone of voice as if she had seen through everything, reminding me of her uncle that was cut off from the world.

It was a philosophic tone that made her hardly seem like my underclassman, or a high school student—but, in terms of an atmosphere of having reached enlightenment, her seeing through was different from Oshino's.

Her attitude that tried to find the balance between good and evil, right and wrong, light and dark—her attitude that kept neutrality as a balancer was the very same as Oshino, however.

"They're not places to walk on, and not places to run on—but for roads, there's meaning in their creation itself. Nowadays, the purpose of roads has settled on trailblazing itself."

It's something that lives for the sake of living—said Ougi-chan.

"For example, even if it's a path that nobody walks on—regardless, creating a path in a place where no paths exist has meaning in itself."

Making paths where no one will walk.

Making paths that no one will use.

And, when they deteriorate, when they crumble away, they'll be remade again and again—they'll continue to be repaired. If it cracks, those cracks will be covered, and if it gets dirty, it'll be washed—the path will continue to be maintained as a path.

"What do you think about it, Araragi-senpai? About making paths that nobody will walk—do you think there's no meaning to it?"

Paths that nobody will walk.

Making paths that nobody will walk—do you think there's no meaning to it?

"You may think so—Araragi-senpai. According to my uncle, you have the habit of trying too hard to find meaning in everything. But I'm not saying that there isn't meaning to it. I'm saying that the meaning is *different*.

The meaning was different.

For the meaning to be different, did that mean it was strange—or else, was the meaning wrong? Unable to come to a conclusion and unable to come up with an answer to the question, I asked Ougi-chan instead.

What about you?

What did you think?

Was there a meaning to making paths that nobody will walk on?—and in response, she smiled sweetly.

Oshino Ougi responded to my question with pleasure, but.

Unfortunately, what kind of response it was—I couldn't remember it.

002

"It's completely become winter, hasn't it—at this rate, it wouldn't be strange even if it snowed. Though you hear about global warming, in the end, winters stay as cold as always—it's not going to be an everlasting summer. What do you think?"

"Well, cold is cold… But I don't know. But, just by looking at the weather reports, isn't it that the winters aren't staying cold? The average temperature is rising even in the winter, right? Since summer gets hotter as well, even if the temperature in winter isn't as low as before, your body just feels colder in comparison, right?"

"I see. You certainly are wise, Araragi-senpai. There must have been a time when even my uncle has given a stone to you—"

"There's never been a time when your uncle has, clearly, done something like that…"

"Haha. Speaking of which, the phrase 'to give a stone', which means to acknowledge someone, is a phrase from Go, right? To give a stone would be to place a stone on the board as a handicap… But doesn't that mean you're just recognizing that you're completely lower in status? In terms of shogi, it would be like playing without a piece…

No matter how much you were recognized, Araragi-senpai, my uncle couldn't possibly have believed you were higher in status than him—"

"....."

In the town I lived in, there was a mountain, and at the peak of that mountain was a shrine. In terms of the mountain, it was a small mountain that nobody climbed, and in terms of the shrine, it was an obsolete shrine that had no visiting patrons...

Well, even so, a mountain was a mountain, and a shrine was a shrine.

November first, early morning.

It was a few hours earlier than when I needed to go to school, and Ougi-chan and I together were climbing the mountain—with our eyes on the shrine at the peak.

When was the last time I had climbed this mountain?

Was it when I climbed it together with Shinobu?

Before that, it would be—with Kanbaru and Sengoku, huh.

Ougi-chan didn't seem like the kind of person with that kind of physical strength, but she was surprisingly good at walking, and she walked ahead of me as if she was the one leading—at the moment, with me at a state where my my power as a vampire was weakning, it almost seemed as if I'd be left behind.

"If you say that my uncle had Araragi-senpai play with a piece missing, though, then it makes both Uncle's and Araragi-senpai's status seem low—"

"...Wait, Ougi-chan. It doesn't matter whether or not my or Oshino's status, falls... But aren't you going to tell me soon? Why exactly are you and I making this trek up the mountain?"

"Now, now, Araragi-senpai. Haven't I already explained that to you?"

"....."

Had she?

She may have done so—but no, even if my character had been recently established as being weak to girls, there was no way that, without hearing, asking for, or being told the details—I would be taken out to the mountains that nobody cared about.

I had to have heard a reason.

It was just that I had completely forgotten—hmm, had I put too much effort into studying for my exams? I had finally gotten used to memorizing year numbers, but if my memory of my daily life had been neglected as a result, then it wouldn't be far from putting the cart before the horse.

Well, regardless, if I had been told already, then it was a little difficult to ask her to repeat it—having only just met this junior of mine, I wanted to show off as her senior. And since she was Oshino's niece, I felt that way even more so.

.....

Huh?

In the first place, how exactly did I get to know this girl?

“Sorry, Ougi-chan—You and I, how exactly did we meet again?”

If my goal was to show off, then as her senior, asking about something so fundamental was probably incredibly embarrassing, but I had asked without thinking about it.

“Haha. Araragi-senpai, you sure are energetic. Did anything good happen?”

Without stopping her ascent up the mountain, Ougi said that. If you looked closely, you’d see that she wasn’t even wearing sneakers for the mountain path.

In spite of knowing that she would be going up a mountain in advance, she had not prepared—but it could be that this kind of mountain path couldn’t even be considered a mountain in her eyes.

She didn’t look like it, but perhaps she was a mountain girl.

It was a rather rough path, though…

“I was introduced to you by Kanbaru-senpai, wasn’t I? Did you forget?”

“…Is that so. Ah—now that you say that, it was like that, wasn’t it. Er, Ougi-chan, you were one of the freshmen in the basketball club, right?”

“You’re full of questions today, aren’t you, Araragi-senpai—are you really that interested in me? I’m just a bookworm with no interest in sports.”

“For being a bookworm… Why do you seem so used to the mountains?”

“That’s because mountains are where the gods are, of course. It happens to be the main field for someone like me.”

She was saying something I didn’t really understand.

However, even as I didn’t understand it, since her words held a persuasive power—since her words held some unidentifiable persuasive power, it was hard to press further. In that way, she very much was Oshino's—that specialist’s niece.

I stayed silent and listened to her speak.

As she continued on ahead of me.

“Mountains are, well, something that’s almost like oddities—so it’s my specialty, to put it shortly. I can understand why a shrine was built on the peak, too—in the first place, this mountain that has the North White Snake Shrine on it used to be completely unrelated. Forcibly bringing in something that was unrelated could end up causing discord, though—”

“Discord?”

“Ah, please ignore it—I couldn’t think of any more appropriate words, so I used the word 'discord’, but it’s not something that’s as bad as discord. There was a mistake in the initialization, so now it’s essentially something that needs to constantly be redone.”

“Have people said that this shrine being built on the mountain a long time ago was a mistake?”

“Even if it was a mistake—is what they say. Just for argument’s sake. Just some temporary stitching. That’s what I’m saying. For example, something like this. Araragi-senpai, you are, right now, frantically studying to get into the same college as your lover, but what if you were to break up with Senjougahara-san? Would you abandon your studies?”

“That’s an unpleasant example to think about…”

The way she spoke in a polite manner despite saying insensible things blunty made me feel that she really was Kanbaru’s junior, in a way.

Even as I frowned, without appearing to care—or rather, without even turning around,

“You probably wouldn’t abandon them, right?”

She said.

“Though your choice of school may change—having spent the past several months studying for exams, it would be hard for you to go back to disregarding them. So even if the opportunity arose from a mistake—you couldn’t deny the sequence of events that led to it. Am I wrong?”

“Don’t say that dating Senjougahara was a mistake. Cut it out, Ougi-chan.”

“I can’t cut it out. I’m completely level-headed, after all—as you can see. Well, nevertheless, if I have hurt your feelings in any way then I apologize, Araragi-senpai. Even so, I’m just speaking in terms of a supposition. I believe that Araragi-senpai won’t have his feelings hurt by a simple theoretical story.”

“……”

Well, scolding her for using an example would be rather intolerant as a senior.

It wasn’t as if her goal was to ultimately use that example, in regards to everything else—speaking of that example, I had indeed fixed my primary goal as going to the same college as Senjougahara, and had begun studying with that as the standard—but it didn’t mean that was all.

For argument’s sake.

Even if it was an impossible 'argument’s sake’, if some catastrophic event were to occur between me and Senjougahara—I wouldn’t simply abandon the enjoyment that I had discovered from studying.

It sounded a little like the sunk-cost fallacy in that I didn’t want to ignore all the hard work I had put into it, but that couldn’t be all of it.

“Hey, Ougi-chan.”

“What is it? Are you angry after all? That’s a problem, as my intention wasn’t to anger you. In fact, I said it because I had meant well.”

“No, I’m not angry… But what do you mean you meant well? Er, in the first place, we weren’t talking about my studies, but about the mountain and the shrine, right? This mountain, and the shrine at its peak, right? About how the initialization was a mistake—”

“Eh, I suppose so.”

Said Ougi-chan.

“For that matter, it would only be those with malicious intent that would criticize it as a mistake, and even if it was a mistake, then the statute of limitations, so to speak, has long since passed, after all—”

Although there has been a trend in the world for the statute of limitations for certain heinous crimes to be revoked, she said.

Ougi-chan stopped walking after having led the way the whole time, and turned towards me.

“—So I’m here to fix that mistake.”

She said.

It seemed that was the reason she had climbed this mountain today—that’s right, now that she mentioned it, I felt as if I had heard that reason before.

I felt that I had heard it in more detail.

Because I had agreed to that reason, I had come along with her to climb the mountain in between the gaps of my studies—and when I looked.

It wasn’t that Ougi-chan had stopped walking and turned towards me to wait for me to catch up, but that we had simply reached our destination.

Behind her, the broken down shrine archway stood.

So behind that must be the shrine road that not even gods walked down, let alone visiting patrons—and even further than that would be the collapsed shrine.

“……”

It wasn’t the season of the first shrine visit at all, but in any case, the mountain climbing had ended, and we had arrived at the shrine of discord—the North White Snake Shrine.

003

For the Kitashirahebi Shrine, I’m sure there were several points of explanation needed—as I had mentioned more or less before, it was a place of many strange coincidences for me, but even taking that out, this place had recently—that is, since spring break, this town had become a popular spot.

Since spring break.

That is, since Oshino Shinobu—the vampire.

It had been about half a year since Shinobu had visited this town—the visit of the legendary vampire, the demon with beauty that could send shivers down your spine. The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire's visit—that was a major incident.

Well, I'm not exactly saying that it was a major incident in my case, and I wasn't using any rhetoric to imply that the existence of vampires was a major incident, either—but for such a powerful oddity to 'stir', it could only be big news for the *industry*.

It might be easier to understand if I compared it to a typhoon.

A typhoon, accounted for by information ranging from class and trajectory, velocity and scale—in meteorology, there are a number of weather phenomena, but how many different kinds of 'weather' are there that have such information accurately measured, and are given names?

It's like that.

If we considered the travels of Oshino Shinobu—formerly Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade—in that way, it would certainly be some kind of calamity.

That's why Oshino made his move—and exhausted the power for the revival of that calamity. Oshino, who fundamentally held the occupation of collecting oddity stories, may have appeared to be a sloppy specialist that only collected ghost stories, urban legends, and idle rumors despite being in this town—but he performed work outside of that as well.

Or rather, if we're speaking of that work, then I had directly helped out as well—as someone related to the vampire incident, and as repayment for my debt.

Due to the appearance of the legendary vampire, there was a spiritual disturbance—and what Oshino had me do to return this disturbed town back to normal was to correct the spiritual disturbance at its center.

And that center, if you had been paying attention, would be.

It could almost be considered ground zero—that would be this very spot, at the North White Snake Shrine.

If I wanted to copy the phrase "city airspot", then I'd call it something like a "rural airspot"—it was a place for the spiritual impurity, or in other words the 'bad things' that could become the ingredients for oddities, to gather—a hangout spot for those drifters.

A place to gather.

Not even a single blade of grass would remain after the vampire had passed through—though Shinobu had exerted a fury that would make you think that would happen, but instead of nothing remaining, the actual byproducts, the actual aftereffects that remained were more troublesome.

It's a story that took only two weeks, but as someone who had become a vampire just like her—as someone who had had a gruesome experience, though I would never say

this out loud, I understood why those specialists that had vampire *battle expertise* had become frantically indiscriminate in their extermination.[17]

In reality, it was due to the 'bad things' that had gathered at this shrine that my little sister's friend Sengoku Nadeko had run into something horrible—it's possible that the con man that had been the cause of that horrible thing was also one of those 'bad things' that had been summoned by the vampire incident.

Well, that's just my individualistic connection of things—in any case, based on the time and circumstances, it would not have been strange if a great youkai war had occurred in the center of the North White Snake Shrine.

A great youkai war.

It had an unbelievable ring to it, but it wasn't something to laugh at—Oshino was being very risky when he passed the whole task of preventing that to a normal high schooler like me. Although, if I hadn't taken on work of such a size, then I probably still wouldn't have settled my debt of five million yen.

In other words, that could have been considered five million yen's worth of work.

"Since it's a shrine that has gone wild and run down, and the god has disappeared—since it was completely empty, I wonder if that's what made it become the support for these 'bad things'?"

As I surveyed the state of my surroundings of the abandoned shrine that I was visiting for the first time in a while, I had included some strong emotions in what I said. Those strong emotions were not because I had missed the shrine, but because it had reminded me of Oshino. It could be because I had come here with Oshino's niece that it was easier to be reminded of him.

"The support, you say?—ha, ha, ha."

Ougi-chan laughed.

She laughed cheerfully—a laugh that was completely unsuited the atmosphere of the abandoned shrine.

"Well, in terms of people's lives, I suppose everyone needs some kind of support—"

"Er, right now I'm not talking about people, but about those 'bad things'."

"Aren't people just a part of those 'bad things'?"

"……"

Like that con man?

As she was Oshino's niece, Ougi-chan probably knew about that con man as well—then why don't I bring him up?—was what I felt in my heart for an instant, but if she didn't know about him, I didn't feel like having to explain who that bastard was, and even if she did, it would still be uncomfortable if we stayed on that subject somehow.

---

[17] Battle expertise and specialty are both pronounced 'senmon'.

So I decided to stay away from talking about that con man with Ougi-chan as long as she didn't bring it up first—and so I swallowed the words that had made it as far as my throat.

But I had remembered what he had said.

In order to get something to circulate—in order to cause an infection, then it has to be completely empty beforehand, and once you can 'create' that empty state—

"……"

Shinobu had visited, exerting her fury.

In the town that had become empty, the various 'bad things' had gathered here as if searching for feeding grounds—and they gathered at the shrine, which was empty even on the inside.

And if my judgment was correct (though it may not reach the level of judgment), it was because this shrine had collapsed, and the god had become absent, that it had become 'empty even on the inside'—

"…Where did the god go?"

"? Araragi-senpai, did you say something?"

"No…"

I had thought of the talisman that I was taking care of—though rather than taking care of, it was something that had been forced onto me by a certain person—though honestly, it would be troublesome if I got rid of it.

It seemed that not even Shinobu could do anything about it, so I was at a loss—as it was a talisman, I wondered if I could offer it somewhere.

I didn't want to hold onto it, if anything.

"Incidentally, don't you think the phrase 'shrine visiting patrons' is a little mysterious, Araragi-senpai? It's not like the people who come to the shrine can be considered customers."

"Hm? Ah… Well, I understand what you're getting at, Ougi-chan… But I can't think of any better expressions that work as well. So, Ougi-chan. What exactly do you mean by wanting to fix the discord? When you said that the initialization was a mistake, did you mean that building this shrine on top of this mountain wasn't appropriate for the snake god…?"

"When you ask if it's appropriate or not appropriate, it's almost like you're asking if this fashion looks good or doesn't look good on me, though—"

Despite being the niece of a specialist, Ougi-chan didn't take particular interest in the surroundings and walked straight down the middle of the shrine road. Even though even I, an amateur, knew that since the middle of the road was where the gods walked, it was bad for humans to walk there… Well, since the god wasn't here, it was possible that it wasn't the case anymore.

Passing by the water pavilion where you would wash your hands, which was not figuratively but literally empty, Ougi-chan reached the shrine itself—and looked up.

“Hm…”

She went, and then whispered.

“This has become something rather troublesome. It makes me want to go home. Or it would, if I had a home to go back to.”

“Eh, don’t you go back to the Oshino residence?”

“Well, the Oshino residence does exist, but—this… feels like it’s just barely balanced. To think my uncle would just get up and leave with things in this state… Is this it?”

Ougi-chan pointed at the talisman that had been stuck to the shrine. That is, the person who had stuck that talisman on would be me.

On Oshino’s command, I, together with Kanbaru, had visited this shrine to put this talisman on—well, I had no idea what sort of spiritual powers this talisman held, and since I had stuck it on without any knowledge whatsoever, I figured taking it off now would bring about some curse. But it seemed that it was a talisman that couldn’t be stuck on unless you were on the level of amateurs like Kanbaru and me—someone completely involved in that world but without any of the knowledge that specialists had.

Well, it wasn’t like Oshino introduced me to some special job worth five million yen involving climbing a mountain once, just out of good will to help me repay my debt.

I figured the talisman I was forced to take care of by a certain somebody held that meaning as well—but instead of security for a loan, that could be considered a bad debt in itself…

“Ah, this is it. That’s what Oshino told me to put here—”

I answered Ougi-chan’s question.

Thinking about it, that was all the way back in June, so it was almost four months since then—it certainly wasn’t something that made me feel nostalgic, but since it was due to Oshino’s job that I had managed to meet my old friend Sengoku Nadeko once again, so in a way it made me feel emotional.

When I think about how I probably wouldn’t be able to hang out with her like I did now if it weren’t for that chance meeting with her, then destiny seems like a very mysterious thing.

Well, it’s not limited to Sengoku—it was the same with Hanekawa and Senjougahara and Hachikuji and Kanbaru…

Even Shinobu.

Even the vampire.

“Well, it’s a little dangerous, balance was more or less achieved in that case—the atmosphere on the grounds did feel refreshing.”

“Refreshing, huh?”

“Yes. At some point, it would have been difficult to call this a hangout spot for the gathered 'bad things’.”

“……”

If right now, the grounds of this abandoned shrine happened to be 'refreshing’, then I would more or less know the reason—after all, on the last day of summer vacation, Shinobu and I had completely 'refreshed’ this place.

Had I already spoken to Ougi-chan about that?

“Well, from now on, it should be fine for another hundred years—at the rate it’s currently at. Let’s just say it’s spreading in a good way. Although, me coming here today could be another matter…”

As she said that, Ougi-chan began doing something that was hard to believe. It was something that was absolutely eccentric with no room for argument—because on that shrine, which hadn’t been repaired for years, she suddenly began to climb up.

“Wh… What are you doing, Ougi-chan?”

In terms of the nuance, I had almost shouted 'What are you doing, Ougi-chan!’, but in sudden circumstances like these, people are unable to shout. I had ended up asking it normally.

Rather, to the point of making me wonder if her self-description as a bookworm was sincere or a joke, Ougi-chan had swiftly, like a wild animal, reached the top of the shrine’s roof in the blink of an eye.

Like a monkey, or maybe a cat.

Though I had time to call out to her, there was no time to stop her—since she wasn’t wearing good shoes for it or clothes that were easy to move in, it was a pretty significant deal.

However, it didn’t seem she was safe just because she reached the top—because, as I had said before, the shrine had turned run down over the years, and it seemed like it would collapse when the wind blew.

It was possible that it would fall flat with the weight of a single person on the roof—if it was an elevator, then the situation would definitely call for an alarm ringing.

Well, it’s possible that because it was so run down, there were more uneven spots that made it easier to climb, which was how Ougi-chan managed to climb up there so quickly as if she was climbing a pole…

“What is the matter? Araragi-senpai. Please follow after me.”

“Er, no, well, I’m wearing a skirt today…”

As if that was the case.

But despite being who I am, I wasn’t so devoted to my juniors that I’d follow such drastic behaviors.

“I’m not good at climbing poles, anyway.”

“Oho. To think that Araragi-senpai, who’s called the Climbing Dragon of Naoetsu High, is speaking such pitiful words.”

“Nobody calls me that. It sounds like Shoryuken or something.”

“Speaking of which, did you know? If the Shoryuken user Ryu’s name was written in kanji, it would be the kanji for 'prosperity’.”

“Really? Not the kanji for 'dragon’?”

“Yes. Ken uses the kanji for 'fist’, however. Well, that was the old setting, so it might have changed by now—but speaking of the setting, Araragi-senpai.”

From the top of the roof, instead of looking at me, she looked out as if she was able to see the entire town from that height—though I wasn’t sure how much of the town you could see from that height—and spoke to me.

“I’m not talking about a dragon, but a snake. Understand?”

“Ah… Is it about the snake god that you’re stepping on right now, Ougi-chan?”

“The snake god is a representative, but are you aware of how snakes became deified here, though they are not on the level of gods?”

“How snakes were deified…”

Hm.

Well, they are feared, and in terms of the image, the 'god of snakes’ does give a sense of unease—but to put that as the basis for such a thing would not be thinking deeply about it.

“It’s not as if they serve any purpose to the lives of humans like cows or horses, and they don’t live close either—there were more candidates, like bugs or worms. Why do you think this is?”

“Why…”

“Think about the zodiac. The Rat, the Ox, the Tiger, the Hare, the Dragon, the Serpent—is the order, but if you think about it, isn’t there something you find a problem with? For the snake to follow after the dragon, isn’t that quite a stage to follow up on? That’s the very definition of an anticlimax, and it would cause a lot of laughter.”

“I don’t think the astrology is there to make people laugh, though—”

I said as I looked up.

It was an angle that made it harder to talk than I thought—my junior looking down at me from a high place certainly didn’t fill me with joy.

“—but I don’t know. Why is it? Is there any history behind it? Myths relating to snakes, or—”

“Well, of course there are myths that relate to snakes. There are mountains of them. But what I’m saying here is, why has the snake managed to get a leading part in these myths?”

By “what I’m saying here”, was she talking about how she was standing on top of the shrine? I considered what she said. Or rather, I searched my memory—if it was something like that—it wouldn’t have been strange to have heard it from Hanekawa or Oshino.

“If I remember correctly—that’s right. Snakes are supposed to be symbols of immortality or rebirth, I think?”

“Oho. You’ve come up with the right answer all of a sudden.”

Ougi-chan nodded.

Although, since she wasn’t looking in my direction when she nodded, I wasn’t exactly sure whether she was actually nodding or if she was just changing the angle at which she looked at the scenery.

“Indeed, students preparing for exams are on a different level.”

“Well… Even if you say "indeed”, there’s no way something like this would show up on the National Center Test.“

"Snakes shed their skin in order to grow, after all—moreover, since snakes don’t have any sort of unevenness like hands or feet, the skin they shed is very easy to understand, or in other words, straightforward. Thinking about the secretive nature of snakes, it’s possible that the skin that’s left behind is more noticeable than the snakes themselves.”

“……”

“Well, during a time when biology hasn’t expanded as far as it has now, if you had managed to observe a snake shedding—you’d want to start considering it sacred.

Immortality. Rebirth.

And—sacredness.

”…But, well, Ougi-chan. That's—"

“Yes, that’s right. To snakes it’s just a biological phenomenon, and has nothing to do with immortality. Also, they have the image of having a strong life force, but in actuality it’s nothing like that.”

“—Is it like the hyena’s image?”

“That’s right, yes. So it would be that there was a misunderstanding from the beginning—but, even so, it would be impossible to try to clear away the sacred image that the snake has after all this time, isn’t it? Realistically speaking—”

“……”

“We learn about it in science class, after all. In modern Japanese society, there are hardly any people that don’t know about how a snake sheds its skin, but—everyone still holds some sense of reverence for snakes somewhere in their hearts. They’re able to accept the term of snake god without any discomfort—”

The initialization was a mistake.

No, it wasn’t a mistake at all—it was simply the wrong period of time.

“What’s wrong? Araragi-senpai. Do you think it’s inelegant to try and explain religion with science? Is what I am saying unrefined? But if you peruse history, you will find mountains of examples where people were unreasonably executed or irrationally punished in the name of religion with an insufficient foundation.”

“…There are mountains of them, huh?”

“I am just saying, if you are going to decapitate someone, you should at least do it rationally—but there’s no need to worry, as it is as I have said before. No matter how unrefinedly I try to explain things, a belief that is produced once cannot be dispelled by theory or reason.”

“……”

I’ve heard something like that last month.

It was about my sister.

She had logically denied the existence of the ghost of the Tea Ceremony Club room, the 'eighth person’ among the club members—she had thoroughly denied it, without missing a single nook or cranny. Since it was that sister of mine, it was an immature denial to the point where people would go, “Are you really going that far?”

However—it was completely meaningless.

No matter what she tried to say, the other members continued to believe in the 'eighth person'—and in that situation, it was actually Tsukihi who became a heretic.

“Through faith, even a sardine head can be valuable—even the empty shell of a snake can be valuable. Well, that’s what this is about, Araragi-senpai. Instincts carved into the body thousands, or even tens of thousands of years ago, still can’t be overturned by hundreds of years of scientific basis. It’s mentality over truth; that’s humanity, and that’s human society.”[18]

“…But I wonder if it’ll change at some point? Something like that… When hundreds of years become thousands of years, and the scientific basis piles up, I wonder if humans will put the truth ahead of mentality?”

“I’m sure they will. Eventually.”

But once humans put truth ahead of mentality, could they still be called humans after that, was something that I was asking deep in my heart—and then, that’s what Ougi-chan said.

She had had the same feeling as me about that.

Or perhaps.

It was the same mentality.

“Well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it—that is, it’s something to consider after Araragi-senpai passes on.”

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[18] Mentality and truth are both pronounced 'shinri'.

After coolly speaking as if she was planning on living longer than me, who still had traces of vampirism, she changed the subject.

“The problem right now is cleaning up the affairs of this shrine—cleaning up this North White Snake Shrine that, over a thousand years ago, enshrined a snake that lived over a thousand years. You could also say it’s cleaning up after my uncle.”

“What do you mean? Haven’t we already taken care of the situation where it would become a gathering place?”

It was an errand fulfilled by me and Kanbaru—so that case should already be over.

“It’s not over yet. Rather, it’s only just started.”

“Well, um, even if you say such a common line…”

I wonder who it was that first said that?

Something like, our adventure has only just begun!—it was a line that made me want to know who would say it normally.

“No, it really isn’t over yet—what my uncle took was more of a defensive measure. We managed to defend, but we haven’t attacked yet.”

“Well… Oshino didn’t seem like the type to attack.”

“I’ll say this in a way that’s easy to understand. My uncle was successful in cleaning up after the invasion of the typhoon named Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade. It certainly is an achievement, no, a great achievement, for a specialist, having managed to prevent the occurrence of a great youkai war. But I wonder? And I think my uncle was being naive here—it’s true that if another oddity on the level of Heartunderblade visited, there is no countermeasure for that, right?”

“……”

The person that had given the talisman for me to take care of—had said something similar to that. Or rather, she had said that as she gave that talisman to me.

But…

“Instead of just keeping the peace for the present, I believe we should form a countermeasure for the gathering place itself for the next time—without a gathering place, there would be no place for the 'bad things’ to gather.”

“Hmm… Well, I understand so far. But isn’t that something that you won’t be able to do alone? For Oshino, I don’t know how much money he would need to reconstruct the shrine…”

“It would be impossible with just money, too. Even if we were somehow able to rebuild the shrine, it would still be a place where, year after year, there wouldn’t be any shrine visitors… In other words, we would need to revive belief in the snake god… Haha, just as you said, Araragi-senpai, it’s an impossible feat for someone to do alone…”

However, just because it’s impossible doesn’t mean it’s something to be given up on—said Ougi-chan.

“You have to correct what needs to be corrected—no matter how meaningless or impossible it seems. Even if there’s no meaning to it, doesn’t it just seem wrong to not correct a mistake? Araragi-senpai.”

“Well… As someone who makes mistakes everyday in his problem sets, I feel like I have to say yes to that question. But there being things we can do and things we can’t do is reality, right? That’s how reality is, right? I don’t believe that a world where anybody can do anything is right.”

“I don’t believe that, either. This is just a problem of intent. It’s a problem of my motive of offensive defense—haha, when I call it an offensive defense, it might make it seem like my motives aren’t very strong. Um… Shall we return to the subject?”

“If we can. I still have no idea what subject we were on in the first place, Ougi-chan—you’ve said something about how the shrine being on this mountain was an initialization mistake with a bad balance, but it’s not like a high school girl like you can do something about it now, right? It’s not like we can just move the shrine somewhere else at this point.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Ougi-chan nodded quickly.

With the way she dodged the question, I couldn’t help but feel her uncle’s blood in her—the feeling of not getting into any arguments.

“Speaking of history, Araragi-senpai. The truth is, this shrine—the North White Snake Shrine used to be in a completely different location.”

“Completely different?”

“Yes. At that point, even the name was different—but for a certain reason, it was transferred to this mountain. It was *placed here*. On the peak of this mountain, the very place I’m standing on.”

“……”

“To explain the story in a little more detail, it seems like in those days, this mountain had a high enough status to be considered sacred—so in order to share that miraculous efficacy, this shrine was transferred here.”

“By transferred… Er, was it like a branch shrine?”

“No, it wasn’t the branch shrine that moved but the main shrine.”

“…Was it okay to do that? It’s not like I know a lot about how shrines work… But for shrines and temples, shouldn’t they normally just stay in one place?”

“It’s not necessarily limited to that. Whether it was because of some typhoon attack or something else, there was some unavoidable reason that the shrine had to be moved—well, that’s not why I brought this up.”

“Eh? Didn’t you just want to talk about history?”

“No, no, the history isn’t worth worrying about. Just because I talked about it doesn’t mean I wanted to talk about it—there was something I wanted you to think about,

Araragi-senpai. The shrine that was in another place, the former North White Snake Shrine—well, the name was different back then, but I'll call it the former North White Snake Shrine for convenience—how did the people back then, that is, the shrine's officials, manage to relocate to the peak of the mountain?—is what I'm saying."

"How… Well, we're talking about something that happened a while back, right? In that case, I don't think they had the skills necessary to move the building itself—so maybe they took apart the building and moved it like that. Although you'd be able to take stuff like the donation box in one piece…"

"Yes. Buildings like these could be built without using a single nail—and disassembling it wasn't very labor-intensive, either. What you've just said, Araragi-senpai, is kind of like the ship-in-a-bottle. In order to put a sailing ship inside a bottle with a small opening, the correct process would be to assemble the parts inside the bottle… But, Araragi-senpai. Unlike the ship-in-a-bottle, it wasn't as if taking the shrine apart made the parts any easier to carry."

"Hm?"

"After all—the path we climbed up on didn't exist in the past."

And saying that.

Ougi-chan—turned towards the shrine archway and pointed at the steep mountain path that we had climbed. Yes, the steep mountain path. Even if the path were there, carrying wood and lumber up that path would be no easy task—but is she saying the path itself wasn't there in those times?

"Yes. It wasn't there. It was during the postwar period that that path was created there. It's fairly recent."

"I wouldn't consider the postwar period to be fairly recent, though…"

"Apparently, in Kyoto they consider the postwar period to be after the Onin War."

"No, I'm pretty sure that's a complete lie. There's no way they'd think that."

"Well, I wonder. It seems there's a tentative reason for it. That is, during the World War, the city of Kyoto itself had not suffered as much damage from air raids compared to other cities, so it would be harder to call it a World War, they say. If you think about it like that, it certainly does seem possible that the postwar period could be considered to be after the Onin War."

"Is that so? So there's a reason…"

When I hear postwar period, for a moment I do consider it to be after the spring break I went through, so it could be the same as that.

"Anyway, so this stairway was constructed relatively recently, huh—"

"Yes. Speaking in terms of the ship-in-a-bottle, the image would be something along the lines of the bottle's neck being extremely long, or perhaps twisted?"

"In that case… Wouldn't the usual way to be to open a path to carry the building materials? That is, until the stairway was made, they used that path instead… By the

time a new, more convenient stairway was made, the other path stopped being used, and was eventually covered by trees and plants."

"That could be. Making a path—that is to say, it's essential in building something. I need not mention the Silk Road as an example, but it's possible for human history to be interchangeable with road history—at first it was roads, and then sea routes, and then air routes that were formed. After that, would it be excursions through space? However, Araragi-senpai, that answer is wrong."

"Huh? Was I wrong?"

"Yes. As I mentioned earlier, it was a sacred mountain that was rather dignified. They couldn't possibly perform such large-scale construction. Of course, a minimum amount of construction is necessary to transfer the shrine to the peak, but the common sense was to avoid as much as possible any actions that would hurt the mountain. Or, rather than common sense—it could be religious piety."

"…So they didn't make a path?"

"Yes. At the very least, not an artificial path. Come now, Araragi-senpai, even though we climbed up this mountain using the stairs made after the war, with enough willpower, even without using those stairs—if we walked on the pathless path full of trees, we'd still be able to make it to the peak, right?"

"……"

I wonder.

People would certainly be able to make it with enough willpower, but the problem would be that I had no willpower. Although, with Ougi-chan being the mountain girl that she was, she'd probably be able to make it…

Well, people of the past were impressive when it came to willpower.

Specifically speaking in terms of construction, they were able to build these unbelievable World Heritage Sites without using any heavy vehicles…

Though I've said that a world where everyone was capable of doing anything couldn't be right, if you disregard human rights and working environments, it's possible that people were capable of doing a lot of things.

However, even if that was the case.

Under these conditions—how were they able to make the 'moving' of this shrine a reality?

I didn't know about the miraculous efficacy or whatever about the mountain in those days, but how were they able to transfer the building to a location with extremely unfavorable conditions from a construction point of view?

"What, did they use some technique that isn't part of this world? Like some supernatural superpower, or a spiritual… like, something miraculous."

“No, there was nothing of the sort. It was simply the intelligence of humans. If you ask me, it was a 'moving’ that was an extreme annoyance—you could say that it’s because of it that I came here, and to this town.”

Really, what exactly is a north white snake?—she said.

Ougi-chan said that, and.

As if something unpleasant had happened—without changing her expression, though there was no particular need to, she acted as if she was going to kick the shrine under her feet.

004

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line.

The North White Snake Shrine—the person who ended up solving the mystery of the relocation of Ougi-chan’s so-called former North White Snake Shrine was, unexpectedly enough, my younger sister’s friend, Sengoku Nadeko.

“That’s simple, Koyomi-onii-chan.”

Was what she had said.

Was what she, who had been placed under the care of the Araragi household due to various reasons, had said.

“It’s an easy game.”

“An easy game…?”

No.

No matter what the answer was, carrying a building to the top of a mountain couldn’t possibly be simple or easy—and it couldn’t possibly be a game.

On the other hand, it could be that because Sengoku was a gamer who could perceive it as a game, she was able to so easily derive the solution.

“It seems like they didn’t do any large-scale construction like paving roads, but from hearing what you said, Koyomi-oniichan, they had to do a minimum amount, right?”

“Hm? Yeah…”

Incidentally, at the time I was speaking to Sengoku about this, I had kept Ougi-chan’s name a secret—and not just her name, but her very existence. Bearing in mind all the various incidents I’ve experienced, I was a little hesitant to introduce one to the other.

Well, it might be being overly cautious.

Though I couldn’t deny that I felt I was overly suspicious…

Of course, it wasn’t that I didn’t tell Sengoku the story about the North White Snake Shrine—if it was about that shrine, then Sengoku was someone related.

“So, they performed a minimum amount of construction there.”

“What do you mean?”

“So, the people doing the construction, the people who compleeted it…”[19]

Said Sengoku.

I felt like the way she spoke was starting to be like Karen—it would be fine if it was like Tsukihi, but why was she becoming like Karen?… Maybe it’s just the difference in how influential they are as people.

You could say that Karen was good at influencing, while Tsukihi was good at being influenced…

“On the peak, they had to clear away the land and make space to build the shrine, right?”

“Yup. Well, clearing land away to make space… That would be considered the minimum amount of construction, right? It’s not like there would randomly be an open space in the middle of the mountain.”

“Right. So, they used the wood from the trees they cut down to build the shrine.”

It wasn’t meaningless construction—said Sengoku.

A meaningful, minimum amount.

“With that, they don’t need to carry any lumber up to the top of the mountain, right? So they didn’t need to trailblaze a new path. They could climb a pathless path up to the peak with willpower, and stay there overnight at the top to do construction.”

“……”

Well, I didn’t think it was absolutely necessary for them to stay overnight—but that was it. Since the location was a mountain, the wood used to construct the building could be found right around them, without needing to carry it up.

There was a mountain of wood.

Once, I had made up the lie that in order to build the dojo that Karen attended, they had used the same type of wood as the tree in the backyard… But it certainly wasn’t aimlessly trying to hurt the mountain that was sacred—using the wood produced from clearing away land in order to build the shrine was, in a way, local production for local consumption, or in other words, based on an ecological mindset in today’s perspective.

It was such a simple answer that now that I had heard it, it could only be that answer—if Ougi-chan’s question had been in the form of, ‘How would you build a new shrine on top of a mountain without hurting it?’, then with time, I would probably have been able to arrive at the same conclusion.

However, in this case, the question was…

[19] Nadeko says 'completed' in hiragana and not kanji, like Karen

“But, Sengoku. It’s supposed to be relocation, you know? Not a new building… But 'moving’. If they had used new wood and built a new shrine, wouldn’t it just be a completely different shrine?”

“Bodie… I mean, bodies of worship, they’d probably take stuff like them with them. But if you’re going to move anyway, wouldn’t you rather want to build a new shrine?”

……

So would it be like Theseus’s Ship?

As you continue to repair a ship, you’ll continue to switch out parts of the ship with new ones, until at some point, no parts of the original will be left—even so, could that ship be considered the same as the new ship?

I felt that it was a problem like that.

“So they just shifted the building, switching it out, and kept only the name—wait, but they changed the name, too, didn’t they…”

As long as the faith didn’t change.

No matter what else changed, at least that wouldn’t change—it was almost like how logic couldn’t change emotion.

Even if you tried to switch it out, it wouldn’t change.

It was unchanging—but wait.

It was possible that that was what Ougi-chan considered the problem—in the first place, if I’m to believe what Ougi-chan said, then relocating the building onto the mountain peak in itself was a mistake.

A mistake?

No—what was important was the balance.

Enshrining a god on top of that mountain destroyed some kind of balance—

“…By the way, I just thought of this from that quiz, Koyomi-onii-chan.”

“Er, it wasn’t supposed to be a quiz, but…”

“That shrine, even though it’s all run-down now, it won’t be rebuilt again, will it?”

“Rebuilt…”

Though I had never thought about it—about rebuilding it.

Certainly in this day an age, we wouldn’t do anything like cut down the nearby trees for construction—and we wouldn’t make a new path, either.

Since the shrine had gotten so run-down. Reconstruction was certainly welcome—but even so, what would happen to Ougi-chan’s so-called balance?

Without any visitors to the shrine.

To rebuild a shrine with no god—if it was reformed, what sort of faith would be born there?

That was wrong—it wouldn’t be born.

It would continue.

No matter what logic you apply, no matter what theories you form.

Faith and oddities—continue to exist.

“It would be nice if they rebuilt it,”

said Sengoku.

“If they rebuilt theh shrine, then I bet it would stop being a place for 'bad things’ to gather. And then, Kuchinawa—I mean, the snake god will probably return to the shrine, too. Right, Koyomi-onii-chan?”

“Ah… Right. It would be nice if that happened.”

Would it be good or bad?

I had no way of knowing that—but I responded to Sengoku like that.

In any case, at some point—it was something that could destroy the balance of our town.

I had a bad premonition.

No, not a premonition—I felt that it was real.

That it wasn’t long until the day I used the talisman given to me by Gaen Izuko—until the day I had no choice but to use it.



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

12
December

Koyomi Torus

001

For Oshino Shinobu, if there was ever a path for her then it could only be a night road. Being the ruler of the night that she was, the night road was the road of royalty—the queen of the undead, the queen of oddities.

Of course, that was all in the past—it was a long, long time ago, and right now, the only territory she governed was my shadow, a plot of land that didn't even amount to one square meter. Though I would think Shinobu would not be very satisfied by that, for the time being I haven't received any complaints as of yet.

Surprisingly, as someone who had absolute confidence in herself, things like the number of possessions she had weren't any significant problems for her—well, though they could be problems, as long as she had herself, no matter what problems occurred, no matter what was missing, she would surely be able to take care of it easily.

Even if she lost power.

Even if she lost meaning.

Even so—as long as she had herself.

"For me, a night road is certainly not something I need to take caution of—rather, what does pose a danger is a road at midday, when the sun shines."

When she hadn't yet become fake or whittled down or a mere shadow of her former self, when she had still been a vampire.

That is, when she was not Oshino Shinobu but known as the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade—on the rooftop of an abandoned building, she had said as such.

For a vampire to speak of the risks of a road at midday, you'd think it was kind of obvious—it made a lot of sense. People like Oshino Meme or the three vampire battle expert specialists may have been enemies, but there has never been a greater natural enemy to her than the sun.

So the fact that, after losing her power, she paradoxically gained the ability to walk beneath the sun was something of an unexpected windfall for her.

No.

Since she had thrown away something large to gain that windfall, it felt a bit distasteful to speak of it in a good way.

"However, the night road is a path where you cannot know what the future holds—in other words, it is a path that you cannot see. If it's a path you cannot see, is it still all right to call it a path?"

She said.

It was true that for a path to function as a path, it was necessary for the boundaries to be distinct—by definition, it technically wouldn't be a path.

If the necessary conditions of a path were that you needed to see it to understand it, then I would agree—even if you told me afterwards that the ground I had walked on was some kind of path, I still wouldn't be satisfied.

If I had to put it a different way, it would be like this.

If you closed your eyes and walked, then no matter what kind of path it was, it wouldn't be accomplishing its function as a path—it would just be the ground.

Even if it was steady, it wasn't a path.

However, even so.

The night road is illuminated by streetlights.

So that you don't lose sight of the path—

Or perhaps, so you don't run into oddities.

"Hm. Streetlights, you say?"

It has been a long time since I have gotten lost in the dark—said she, after listening to my words, as if she had gotten bored of being a vampire. Well, the darkness having decreased would mean that her territory had decreased as well, so I could see why she got bored—her territory being invaded upon was far from not being a significant problem.

The dark.

And the darkness.

Though it would never be extinguished—after all, the word extinguishing itself has the meaning of bringing forth the dark or the darkness.

"If there was something that illuminated the night roads of the past—it would only be the moon."

The full-orbed moon.

It was unfortunate that that night had not been a full moon—but, as if she was yearning to see it again, she looked up at the sky.

The night sky that illuminated the night road.

002

"Panaino!"

She said.

Shinobu said, abruptly—as she had used the phrase for several months now, it was almost routine, but even so, hearing the phrase so abruptly was still a surprise.

It made me shrink in fear of what might have happened.

Coupled with the strength of her line, it made me feel like she had gotten angry at me. The phrase was originally supposed to be the phrase ‘hanpa ja nai’, meaning 'not half bad’, which was shortened to 'panaino!’, but I had the suspicion that she had lost sight of the original meaning and was using it as a greeting.

I almost wanted to ask, do you really think something isn’t half bad, or aren’t you just using 'panaino’ in a way that’s half bad?

It was December.

The end of the year—the month also known as Shiwasu.[20]

I’ve heard the explanation that it was called Shiwasu because it was a period of time when teachers became so busy that they had to start running, but it seems this is simply what’s widely known.[21] Well, when I first heard it, I had thought that teachers were running around even when it wasn’t the end of the year, but I was informed by Hanekawa that it was just the widely known version, so I was satisfied. But if you asked me what the real origin of the term was, then I wouldn’t know it.

I didn’t ask, either.

The way my thirst for knowledge was lacking could be one of my weak points—well, if January jumps, February flees, and March makes a break for it[22], then December running wasn’t weird enough for me to ask about it.

Well, putting aside whether or not teachers were busy, there was no doubt that December was a busy time for us students preparing for exams—after all, the National Center Test was only next month.

There was no free time for me.

Well, to be honest, it was hard to say that it was because of the exams that I was being worked to death—rather, it wasn’t just exams but the entire concept of studying that I wanted to get away from.

Of course, it wouldn’t be a problem if I could do that.

Humans.

Even if they knew that it was almost time for them to die—even if their time of death had been decided, they still had to continue living until they died.

They had to continue with their life.

So that’s why, on that day, I was continuing on my final spurt towards the exams when, as I was filling the gap between math and Japanese by trying to get some sugar in my bloodstream, Shinobu appeared.

Panaino!

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[20] Traditional Japanese name for December.

[21] Shiwasu literally means 'masters running'.

[22] Alliterative Japanese idiom that doesn't translate well in English.

She said.

“...Yo, Shinobu.”

To the blonde girl who, after leaping out of my shadow, was examining her surroundings with the eyes of a hawk or the eyes of a demon, I decided to greet her like that.

Oshino Shinobu.

Vampire—former vampire.

She was the queen of oddities that normally lay dormant in my shadow—though right now she was a queen that had fallen, well, there was no change in her grand, monarch-like behavior.

Moreover, as her original nature as a vampire was being nocturnal, even after she lost her power—even now, when she had lost her essence, it was normal for her to be sleeping soundly during the daytime when the sun was up, but today she was awake when it was only three in the afternoon.

Rather than calling her nocturnal or a vampire, this was just having a poor sleep schedule—at this rate, she may even start saying it was still nighttime in the morning.

However.

She had appeared, not because it was midnight, twilight, or the witching hour, but because it was simply snack time.

“Good morning.”

“Good mornaino!”

She carelessly returned my greeting.

A new phrase had been born from the mixing of 'good morning’ and 'panaino’... It was a saying that would become harder to control as the variations increased. And Shinobu, finished with looking around restlessly, finally turned to look at me—

“Mm.”

She noticed.

“So it was that. Hm, so it is true that the nearest part of the lighthouse is the darkest.”

“Er, if the nearest part is the darkest, isn’t that good for you, at least?”

Bathing in the honor of being unexpectedly compared to a lighthouse, which was the symbol of height, I returned her gaze.

“What, did you forget what I looked like?”

“Nay.”

She said, and pointed at me.

No, it wasn’t me she was pointing at—it was the tray I was carrying.

“The source of that scent was that!”

“Hm. Ah… I thought I would get something to eat during break time…”

On top of the tray I had brought from the first floor kitchen to my room was a plate with snacks and a mug of black coffee… But had she really come leaping out of my shadow in response to snack time?

What kind of vampire was she?

Isn’t your royal conduct lowering the dignity of oddities?

“If there is no cake, then I shall eat bread! That is me.”

“You’ll just ruin your health with that personality.”

“But, I am truly troubled by how sweet buns should be reated. Are sweet buns supposed to be pastries or bread? Are they a staple food, or are they snacks, which one is it?”

“Sweet buns are snacks. Don’t be worried by something like that!”

“However, if they were actually death buns, then it would surely be a staple food for vampires—ka ka.”[23]

Shinobu smiled frighteningly.

Well, the smile itself would make an exceedingly great picture, but, how should I put it? It certainly wasn’t a smile that should have appeared in a situation about sweets, during a conversation with sweets as its subject.

“So, what are you having? Are they donuts? They’re donuts, right? They have to be donuts!”

“Aah… Well, they are donuts.”

Though I actually wasn’t as tall as a lighthouse (obviously), since Shinobu’s present height was that of a little girl, she wasn’t able to see the contents of the tray I was holding from her point of view.

“But Shinobu, even if they are donuts…”

“So they are donuts! That’s magnificent!”

Shinobu raised both her arms.

She was completely acting like a child.

In that action, I couldn’t even see fragments of the appearance and dignity of the of her former height, which was at least twice mine—naturally, she couldn’t even reach my head if she held her arms up.

“My intuition was right on the mark! I had a premonition that today’s sweets would be donuts! Now, my master, please present to me those donuts immediately!”

“If I did it immediately, then snack time would be over… Er, but, Shinobu-chan.”

[23] Sweet buns and death buns are both pronounced 'kashipan'.

As I wondered how I would explain to the puzzling girl who ordered her master to present things to her, I figured that a picture is worth a thousand words, and placed the problematic tray on the floor for Shinobu to see.

“Yahoo! …Hm?”

In an instant, Shinobu went from a state of high-tension celebrating to a dubious expression. She stared at the five donuts lined up on the large plate that was on the tray.

“My master.”

“What is it?”

“What are these? Are they a new product of Mister Donut?”

“No, Shinobu. These are handmade donuts.”

“So they’re a new product called 'handmade donuts’?”

“If you sold donuts with a name like that, then the other donuts seem like they’re not handmade! No, no. You might have been sleeping then, but Senjougahara visited just now. She brought me these donuts as a sign of support.”

“……?”

Shinobu looked as if she didn’t understand.

If we couldn’t communicate with each other on something like this, then what was the point of the pairing?

“Like I said, she made these donuts using the kitchen in her house and brought them to me as refreshments.”

I was explaining it a second time with roughly the same meaning—I guess there was no choice but to explain this patiently in this case.

Or rather, because I had been expecting this, I had been planning on eating them on my own not as a late-night snack but as a midday snack, when Shinobu wasn’t awake…

“Hm? Huh, wait a minute. Let me think about this.”

“Your manner of speech is too normal! What happened to your old person way of speaking?”[24]

'Let me think’, she said.

It’s too plain!

“So basically, that tsundere girl (18) that you call your lover…”

“We don’t need information like (18), you (600)!”

“I happen to be (598). Don’t round my age up.”

“Says the person who’s been rounding down the tens place for a long time.”

“So that tsundere girl (even a demon is sweet at 18)…”

[24] Shinobu speaks in an old-fashioned way. Hard to get across in English without going full Shakespearian.

“She’s not a demon. Don’t talk about someone’s girlfriend like coarse tea! Not to mention, the demon is you.”[25]

The conversation wasn’t advancing.

It could mean that Shinobu was just that confused—the fact that she wasn’t going on a rampage meant in itself that she was in that much shock.

If that was the case, I was afraid of what was next. Really afraid.

“So that tsundere girl created a counterfeit of Mister Donut? That’s unforgivable, it’s criminal!”

“It’s not a counterfeit. They’re just normal, typical donuts. They’re homely donuts that, so to speak, didn’t require any professional skill.”

If I had to go further, I would say they were donuts that even Senjougahara was capable of making, but I wanted to avoid saying something that humiliated my own girlfriend.

“I don’t really get it…”

Shinobu folded her arms, and fixed her gaze as if she was inspecting the donuts on the plate. You could almost call it glaring, with how intense her gaze was.

It seemed like she was trying to glare a hole in them—although since they were donuts, they already had holes from the beginning.

“Well, no, I understand the events that have occurred.”

“Events that have occurred… You’re saying that like it’s some incident. Don’t talk about my girlfriend bringing me refreshments as if it’s a historical incident. It’s just an ordinary happening.”

“So basically, that tsundere counterfeiter chose to bring you donuts, and instead of taking a step into the Mister Donut Shinobu store, she developed her own original donuts in her own home?”

“Developed… Well, fine. It’s a strange word to use, but the meaning is mostly right.”

I had no idea if there was actually anything like the Mister Donut Shinobu store, but she was probably referring to the Mister Donut in our town that she preferred to go to.

Rather than preferred, it might be better to say that it was essentially her own personal store…

“For what reason?”

Shinobu asked me with a serious expression.

She was looking straight at me with round eyes as if she was asking for what reason people are born, or why they die, but the “for what reason” she was asking was not one of those, but “for what reason did she make donuts in her own home?”

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[25] The full idiom is 'Even a demon is sweet at 18, so coarse tea is good on its first infusion', meaning everything is good in its season.

“Well, if you have to ask me that… Then it’s to encourage me in my studying for the exams…”

Although, I think she had a second motive to check up on me and make sure I was studying properly and hadn’t fallen to despair and resorted to self-harm, but I’m sure the main reason was encouragement—but what Shinobu was asking was not that.

“I’ve told you that I do not understand. I’m saying, what intention did she have in going out of her way to make something that’s being sold elsewhere?”

“It’s a little grandiose to call it an intention…”

“It’s cheaper to buy them, is it not?”

“……”

I was being lectured on financial efficiency by a vampire that had lived for almost six hundred years… Well, in terms of cost-performance, I wonder if she’s right? If you’re simply talking about the cost of the ingredients, then making them by hand might be more economical, but when you think of the effort that goes into buying them and the effort that goes into making them, or rather if you think of the labor cost of one Senjougahara Hitagi, then I could see the reasoning behind the opinion that 'it’s cheaper to buy them’…

But that just sounded like something a person bad at housework would say…

“During a fair, one donut is a hundred yen at Mister Donut. For five, it’s five hundred yen. Even if you add the consumption tax it’s five hundred and twenty five yen. Though of course it depends on the situation, five hundred twenty five yen is generally a cheap amount of money! Are you saying that tsundere girl was being stingy with such an amount?”

“Rather than being stingy… It’s more that she put in more effort.”

“Why did she put in such an effort is what I’m asking!”

Her questioning was perseverant.

Although, if I called it perseverant, that made it sound like she was asking decent questions—so instead of perseverant, I should call it something like obstinate.

“Even if you raised the consumption tax to eight percent in my example… Umm, you’ll multiple five hundred by eight and get three…”

She began counting on her fingers.

Well, eight percent wasn’t as easy as five percent… But you wouldn’t be able to do any multiplication on your fingers.

“Ku! I don’t know! What was the point of increasing the consumption tax gradually, when we could’ve just raised it to ten percent in one go!”

“You’re being really stubborn.”

Even though the calculation was pretty easy.

Although the person paying would be me, not you.

I was confronting the realistic issue of being responsible for Shinobu's life for the rest of my life, which meant, without exaggeration, having to support another person all on my own.

"Anyway! If we exclude the tax then it's only one coin! Why wouldn't you pay that! Why would you try to end snack time with your own self-indulgent donuts!"

She had finally brought up tax exclusion.

The consumption tax, huh… Well, it's not like I was suddenly in the position to talk about the government just because I had studied a little social science, but just from the name, it was kind of a nonsensical tax. To tax consumption… That basically meant that money was needed for something that people needed to live.

"Although, when it's not during a fair, then even if you exclude the tax, it's impossible to get it in one coin."

"Fairs happen almost year-round, do they not? I've discovered that the period of time in which there are no fairs might even be shorter!"

"No, I don't think it goes that far…"

But it was true that that well-known donut store did often have the service of a one-for-a-hundred-yen sale. It did make me want to calculate what the ratio was.

"Speaking of which, they had a donuts are half-off sale recently, as well."

Hm.

Speaking of that, back when they had a hundred yen sale, Shinobu was a rather annoying vampire that kept pestering me to take her (and it was because of her that we once encountered a certain con man), but this time, she never made any demands like that.

"If it's a half-off sale, then five donuts would be approximately three hundred yen, I think…?"

"Nay, I think a half-off sale is overdoing it. I do wish they would stop trying to sell themselves off so cheaply."

Shinobu said earnestly.

So that's why she never pressed me to take her to the Mister Donut Shinobu store—it wasn't that she was being considerate about my studies.

"Making things cheaper in exchange for raising taxes may be the way things are in Japan right now, but it's clearly visible that that will dwindle away at some point. I believe it's necessary for the people to realize that 'good things are expensive'."

"Don't lecture me about the government. And don't grieve for the country."

That blonde girl.

That vampire.

"It must be made known to everyone that making something cheaper only means that someone has to work for less!"

“What I was saying was that Senjougahara made these donuts for me for no charge.”

“Eh? Did you not pay any money, my master?”

“I’ve never heard of a girlfriend that asks for money in exchange for refreshments.”

“Impossible!... To think that miser would...”

“……”

Senjougahara’s image seemed rather poor.

Although, considering the events of last month, she was not only my benefactor but also the benefactor of Oshino Shinobu as well... But it seemed this little girl had no feelings of gratitude for that.

“Be attentive, my master! There could be something in these!”

“Now hold on, what do you think a person’s gilfriend is? The only thing that could be in these is affection.”

“You should’ve personally experienced last month that love and food preparation can turn into poison, have you not?”

With a hmph, Shinobu warily pinched a donut.

She was completely acting as if it was a hazardous material.

I was completely against letting anyone treat Senjougahara’s home cooking like that, but because I knew how special donuts were to Shinobu, I had no choice but to close my eyes to it.

Since it was what dorayaki was to Doraemon—speaking of which, since when was it decided that dorayaki was Doraemon’s favorite food?

“Mmm. There is nothing strange in how it feels. Well, it’s not as if that poisonous girl would plan a trick that can by felt by touch...”

“Poisonous girl... Hold on, it’s been a while since she’s stopped using her abusive language...”

“Hasn’t it made a come-back recently?”

With a hmm, Shinobu brought the donut she picked close to her face for inspection. It seemed she was confirming that there were nothing strange on the surface of the donut using her former vampire eyesight... Although, the only thing I would think you’d be able to see is the sugar that was sprinkled on it...

“If you include this case of the refreshments, she’s actually been extremely nice to me!”

“Well of course. Anyone would be nice to a person nearing their death.”

“Who’s nearing their death? I’ll do something about that case, okay? I’ll bet my life on it.”

“Isn’t the problem that you can bet your life on something so easily? Really, you don’t reflect on anything, my master—hm.”

The atmosphere around Shinobu changed.

Well, from the start she had a solemn expression on, but the atmosphere became all the more darker.

“What is this hole?”

“Hole?”

“This suspicious hole. It’s possible that something was injected into this donut via this hole.”

Saying that, she quickly glanced at me—through the hole in the donut.

“…No, stop trying to act like such a clichéd idiot. Donuts are supposed to have holes in them.”

“Why is that?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I’ve just assumed it’s always been that design, and never thought about it deeply… But why do donuts have holes in them? At this rate, isn’t it just wasteful?”

This time, Shinobu placed a finger in the donut’s hole and began to spin it around like a hula hoop.

It was only because it wasn’t from Mister Donut that her treatment of it was so rough—I wanted to tell her not to play with her food.

Though I hadn’t studied enough to know when Doraemon started to like dorayaki, I fortunately at least knew about the holes in donuts.

Or rather, it was only today, just a little while ago, when I learned about them.

I had heard from Senjougahara when she brought me the donuts—'I even meticulously put the holes in the donuts like this,’ explained Senjougahara affectionately to me, who took pride in his lack of culture.

Just to make sure, when I say affectionately, I don’t mean her usual sarcastic remarks, but actual affection, and in a simple, easy to understand manner.

“Shinobu. Donuts like those with the holes in them are a variety of donuts called torus donuts. It’s a strategy where, by making a hole in the center like that, the heat can circulate better throughout the donut when you fry it.”

“So is it something like thermal efficiency?”

“Well, something like that. If the donut didn’t have a hole, then it would be hard for the center part to cook properly. That’s why they extract the center.”

The word 'extract’ may not be very appropriate considering the original way to make it, but the fact that it was easy to understand took precedence.

“Heh… Is that so.”

“So how about it? I’m very knowledgeable, aren’t I?”

“So you call it a torus, huh? This shape.”

“Don’t admire that part of it!”

“What’s the difference between a ring and a torus?”

“That would be the solidness of it… Shapes like donuts or bagels are solids with three dimensions, so they’re called toruses… While a ring means something more like a circle… Umm…”

“Oi oi, my master. If you can’t solve a question as simple as this, how do you plan on breaking through the National Center Test?”

No.

Something like this isn’t going to show up on the National Center Test.

“Is the hole in a baumkuchen the same?”

“No, for a baumkuchen, you put a pole through the hole when you bake it—so the way you make baumkuchens and donuts are completely different…”

“And how do you fry the other donuts that aren’t torus donuts, the ones without holes in them? The heat doesn’t reach the center, correct? There are plenty of those kinds of donuts at Mister Donut as well, and it is not like they aren’t cooked all the way. Isn’t it that the hole is not actually necessary?”

“You’re really brimming with interest in the structure of donuts… Don’t lose sight of your original goal. Your goal was inspecting these donuts, right?”

Looking at the clock, it was already half past three.

I had set aside thirty minutes for my break time, but I had already exhausted all of them up—I hadn’t planned for any lost time, so unfortunately, my plan to elegantly partake in my snacks, consume some sugar, and bring peace to my soul had ended in complete failure.

Well.

In any case, I did think that one person having five donuts was overeating—though the implication has changed slightly, I’ll offer some hush money to the loudly complaining Shinobu and put an end to this scene.

“Shinobu. Don’t just stop at an investigation of how it feels, and try tasting it already.”

“Huh? What?”

“Well, if you’re going to check whether or not it’s poisoned, the best way would be to taste it for poison.”

“Are you asking me to be your poison taster? To think I’d be treated as the canary in the coal mine, I have no words for how cruel my master is!”

But as she said that, her expression relaxed.

It began to sparkle enthusiastically.

In terms of an anime, the marks on her cheeks were emphasized—and her eyes started to shine.

“I’d like to let out a piercing cry against being treated as a canary! Yes, like this donut with a hole in it!”

“Sounds like you got mixed up when you were trying to say something cool… Just give up already and eat up. Eat up and be quiet.”

At the very least, she had to quiet down as she was chewing—I had no plans, as her guardian, of training her to start speaking as she was eating something.

Well, even if Senjougahara had put poison in the donuts meant as a sign of support, it wouldn’t affect Shinobu in the slightest—she was still a vampire, even if she had gone stale and wasn’t what she once used to be.

If she could gulp down iron manacles without breaking her composure, there’s no way she’d die from just poisonous donuts.

“Oh dear, you are hasty, aren’t you, my master? I’m telling you now, I’m not someone that thinks all donuts are fine, you know? You’re making a huge mistake if you think that you can win me over by feeding me donuts made by some nobody. If you want to escape from my investigation, then you should go to the Mister Donut Shinobu store immediately and buy the Pon De Ring Nama Choco Golden! Can you believe it? It’s already a breakthrough to make a Nama form of the Pon De Ring, but then they arranged it like a Golden Chocolate, you know? How far will they keep piling it on? I haven’t tasted it yet, but I can already imagine the flavor expanding in my mouth, and I’m certain that I’ll shout without being afraid of what others might think Japanaino!”

She shouted.

Since she had shouted with such a flushed expression, even though she had lamented the economy of this country just a moment ago, the shout seemed more like a war cry praising the country of Japan now.

003

I’d like to note before anything else that my girlfriend Senjougahara Hitagi was not, by any means, good at cooking—or, more accurately, in terms of her life, I might say she was able to come this far without having to prepare food very often.

Her elementary school years when she had a weak constitution, her middle school years when she studied vigorously, and her high school years when she was possessed by an oddity—regardless of her age, she was an honor student, but the reality was that she had never gotten to the skill of cooking. However, be as it may, because her oddity-related problems had come to a full stop, she could focus on the ‘minor things'—she had gained the freedom to put her effort into things she once thought were minor, and though it’s only a little at a time, she had decided to try training those skills as well.

To be honest, when I looked at the shape of the five donuts lying on the plate, my thoughts were that they were rather diverse, or perhaps uneven or unbalanced, with

sizes large and small—in other words, it wasn't like I didn't understand why Shinobu was cautious about its appearance, but it seemed that for the taste, they managed to obtain a passing grade from donut critic Oshino Shinobu-sensei.

Panaino!

It was not that, but a "Japanaino!" that had come out.

If Mister Donut's 'Pon De Ring Nama Choco Golden' (something that really didn't make any sense, as someone who had never seen it) was three stars, then could this be worth at least one star?

"That girl sure pulled through, didn't she? I knew she would pull through someday, and that day is today!"

"Er, I would say that that day was last month on the 2nd, when she saved both our lives…"

"Hm! I only have a bite of knowledge in the field of donuts, but this is a great accomplishment!"

"Having a bite of knowledge seems only natural…"

Considering she had actually bitten into a number of donuts.

A great accomplishment indeed.

"It's fantastic! Call that tsundere girl immediately! I wish to praise her directly!"

"Don't act in that 'my compliments to the chef' way…"

Strictly speaking, since the food in question were donuts, I suppose it wouldn't be a chef but a patissier.

Hmm.

Well, it was obvious that the donuts weren't poisoned, but to be honest, I had only accepted the donuts not for the taste but for the feelings that came with it, so watching Shinobu praise the donuts so much with cream all over her face made me pretty happy.

Although, it wasn't as if I did anything.

"But, you know, you've come all this way despite hardly ever interacting with Senjougahara, so it would be a little weird to suddenly meet with her after being moved by the donuts."

"I would like to apologize for calling her the tsundere girl all this time. Even if she may not be worthy of the title Mister Donut, I would still like to present to her the title of Master Donut."

"That's a pretty grand title…"

Wouldn't that be praising her a little too much?

Rather than just normal praise, she was really laying it on thick—in general, Senjougahara was at a stage where any cooking she did had points she could improve

on, so it honestly seemed a little questionable to receive such a high opinion for some fried dough.

And I'd heard that making sweets is even harder than making food for your three meals a day… Sweets were something you couldn't just make with nuance… It required careful calculation and timing, and what it demanded was on a completely different scale than ordinary cooking… Ah, is that what it is?

I understood.

Somewhere in my head, I had come upon a hypothesis, and come to an understanding—in terms of Senjougahara's personality, such precise demands were actually easier for her to meet. The theory would be that if she could just rely on the manual and the scale instead of her own sense of taste, then there's no opportunity to make careless mistakes.

And you couldn't taste these donuts until they were completely done, either… So the only thing she had to rely on her senses for were the shapes, which would explain the disorder of the shaping.

"……"

Well, that was my theory.

The truth could simply just be that Senjougahara's unique sense of taste and Shinobu's peculiar sense of taste just happened to agree.

First, I decided to confirm the taste of my girlfriend's handmade donuts myself.

But as I reached my arm out, Shinobu quickly dodged to the side with the plate of donuts I was aiming for.

"…Hm? What are you doing?"

"I could ask the same thing. The poison tasting is not over yet!"

"No, it's over, isn't it? You ate it like usual and said it was delicious like usual, didn't you?"

"You never know. It could be poison with a delayed effect. It could be deadly poison with a delayed effect."

Shinobu said with a cautious tone of voice.

Though her mouth are was covered in cream and sugar, her tone of voice was cautious.

It made me want to clean her lips up by kissing and licking it off.

Although I wouldn't.

"It may be all right now, but it could be the kind of poison that would affect your offspring."

"Er, even if she fed me something like that, wouldn't that mean she was just doing something like that to her own children?"

"Now, now, that tsundere girl isn't restricted to only living the rest of her life with you, is she?"

“……”

Well.

Considering the current situation I was in.

Instead of avoiding the problem, it was probably time for me to start thinking of ways to at least save Senjougahara alone, if anything.

That would be… in the worst case, a double suicide with Shinobu.

“And so, the poison inspection shall continue.”

“Continue? What happened to it being a huge mistake?”

“Oh, don’t worry, you can leave it all to me. If I do a comparison inspection of four more patterns, I should be able to derive the results.”

“Four patterns? Now, Shinobu-tan, from what I can see, the number of remaining donuts happens to be exactly four.”

“Oho, the exact number! It’s perfectly suited for this experiment.”

“No, you just set up your experiment to suit your needs! Hand over that plate!”

“I will not. As my master’s attendant, it is my duty to protect my master from any risk, no matter how small!”

“Don’t act like my attendant only when it’s convenient for you!”

Acting like an attendant.

It was kind of a cool phrase for having said it so suddenly.

“Hand over that plate!”

Though I repeated the same line, Shinobu had taken hold of the plate and had no intention of letting go of it. Well, strictly speaking, she wasn’t taking hold of it—she was carrying it unstably in one hand.

Of course, she was probably doing that on purpose.

If I leapt towards her carelessly, I would create a situation where the plate could flip over, so she was creating an easy-to-understand stalemate.

If I tried to take the plate by force and the four donuts fell to the floor, then I would lose everything—even though she had forfeited her power as a vampire, her wisdom still remained. This was really a problem.

“This is your last warning, Shinobu. Hand over that plate.”

“Ka ka. You sure are poor at negotiations, my master.”

Shinobu said to me as she carried the donuts in such an unstable way.

“Never letting down that stubborn attitude, just persistently repeating 'hand it over’. Isn’t it because of that that the talisman that the boss of the specialists entrusted to you was stolen from you?”

“Uh.”

Well.

That was the case.

But really, was that the sort of thing to bring up to compare with the scramble for donuts? It was because that talisman was stolen that both you and I, and all our surroundings, were caught up in this mess—this terrible state of affairs.

“If you had tried to negotiate properly then, then we wouldn’t be trapped in this situation right now. You need to reflect on your actions.”

“……”

I had thought that I deserved whatever anyone said to me about that incident, but the last person I wanted to hear it from was you.

I may have been careless, but you were pretty careless yourself.

“No, no. I’m trying to say something serious here.”

The blonde girl who was trying to say something serious with donuts in one hand stuck out her chest and spoke in a boastful way.

“I’m telling you to start practicing, even in your everyday life, so that a second tragedy like this does not occur. Or do you think you’ll be able to persuade the snake god if you cannot persuade me?”

“Mm…”

Well.

I couldn’t say anything if she said it like that.

I had assumed that we would be able to escape from the current tragedy—but even if it was a matter of course, I should still take into account what came next.

If I blame my lack of negotiation skills as the culprit for our current condition, then it was a weakness I needed to overcome—of course, there was no way I could achieve in a single day the eloquent negotiation skills that Oshino had, or the way of finding balance by mediating between this and that—but even if it wasn’t in a single day, if I put in an effort in everyday problems like this one…

“…Wait. No matter how you think about it, that reasoning is weird!”

“Tch. You figured it out?”

“How could I not? All I’m doing is holding you back from eating all the donuts, so why would I need negotiation skills for that? Just return them normally! Just return them! Just take my persistence in saying 'hand them over’ and return them! This is just an internal dispute!”

“The thing with the snake god is also an internal dispute, is it not?”

“I said that the previous warning was the last, but I’ll do you a favor and give you one more chance. I’ll say this again with persistence. Shinobu, hand over that plate.”

“If you’re fine with taking just the plate, then I’m fine with complying with that request.”

“There’s no way I’d be fine with that!”

“Well, they say if you’ve taken poison, you may as well lick the plate clean. I can eat the donuts, and my master can take the plate. I would say that’s a fair distribution of roles.”

“On top of the fact that that’s nowhere near fair, it would first require Senjougahara’s donuts to have poison in them. Stop messing around!”

There had been no communication going on since some time ago. Though the time I had spent alongside Shinobu had become fairly long, it was rather difficult to cross the species barrier.

It seemed that Shinobu had reached the same conclusion, and let out a discouraged sigh without trying to hide it.

She was bluntly signaling to me that she was disappointed in me.

It seemed that we could understand each other’s intentions here, but outside of that, we had become careless. We couldn’t communicate.

“In my opinion, it was already a failure in the first place when you let me see these donuts. You should have eaten them without letting me see them! You should’ve eaten them secretly without waking me up! If you had done that, you could’ve avoided such needless trouble.”

“I’d say you’re the one who started this needless trouble… It’s like having a terrible neighbor!”

More than being a neighbor, with you lurking in my shadow, it would be absolutely impossible to eat without you noticing—even if you were sleeping, if you woke up because of the smell, then there was nothing I could do.

“Hm. In that case…”

Said Shinobu.

“Before negotiation skills, my master, you should first hone your sense of secrecy.”

“Secrecy?”

“See here, even before getting to the negotiations, if you had simply hid that talisman in a better place, we wouldn’t be in this situation, would we? I could even say that hiding it in such an easy-to-find place marked the beginning of this tragedy.”

“Well… It’s not like I don’t understand what you’re saying, but.”

Answering an argument like this might be one of my bad points. Could the cause for my poor negotation skill be this personality, where I unexpectedly end up listening to the other party?

“But it’s clear that I was really stumped about where to hide it, right? I don’t know, it was like I was forced to hold onto some kind of weapon or something…”

Or rather than forced to hold onto it.

I was forced to bear the burden of it.

“It was risky if I wasn’t carrying it around, but it was even more risky to be carrying it around… In the end, I had no choice but to put it there.”

“But you reached that 'in the end’ rather quickly, didn’t you? In terms of tarot cards, you would be The Fool.”

“What was the point of going as far as speaking in terms of tarot cards? Wouldn’t it be fine to just call me a normal fool?”

Though it wasn’t exactly a good thing.

It’s not like any student preparing for examinations could stand being called a fool.

“In terms of tarot cards, I would be The Moon.”

“In tarot cards, wouldn’t The Devil or Death be more appropriate? As a vampire, those seem closer in meaning…”

“I’m The Moon. As evidence, if it were me, I would definitely have hidden that talisman better. And I would definitely have hidden the donuts better, as well. My master, know that your own foolishness is what brought on our unfortunate circumstances!”

“……”

She sure is angry, isn’t she?

But, on the other hand, if she hadn’t been able to ignore her own faults like this up until now, she probably wouldn’t have been able to live the long life that she did.

When she couldn’t do so, she had gotten on the verge of committing suicide, after all.

Well, as for the current situation with the snake god that I was in, let’s just say I was biding my time to see if the countermeasure I put into place would succeed—but if I didn’t resolve this donut problem right now, I wouldn’t be able to resume my studies.

In that case, this was the critical moment.

“Then, tell me this, Shinobu. Putting aside the talisman case—if it were you, how would you have hidden the donuts?”

“It would be hard to put it in words. It would be the reverse of it being easier said than done, since just actually doing it would be a lot quicker.”

Shinobu said.

“If I can just have five minutes, I’ll make these donuts splendidly disappear from your very eyes. You’ll never be able to find them.”

“Five minutes… Now hold on, if I gave you five minutes, you’ll just eat the rest of the donuts in that time. If you just eat them and say 'see, they’re gone!’ then that’s totally cheating!”

And of course, the oddity skill of taking them into my shadow was also cheating—if I had a skill like that, I would definitely have been able to hide the donuts from you, and better yet, the talisman as well.

“Ka ka. Do you really think I’d use such a crafty trick?”

“You definitely would…”

In the first place, I would definitely describe the person currently keeping Senjougahara’s donuts as 'sly’.

“Well, I don’t know about all four of them—but if it was one or two, I can definitely hide them. How about a bet? I’ll get five minutes to hide the donuts, and you’ll get five minutes to find them.”

“……”

“The rule will be that out of the four donuts, the donuts that you were unable to find will be mine to eat. In other words, if you are able to find all four of them, my master, then you may eat all four of them.”

“Hm…”

I was a little reluctant to gamble for donuts that should have been mine in the first place, and it was something that would have made me want to punch her if she wasn’t in the form of a little girl, but… In this case, I had no choice but to play along with her if I wanted to get back to studying.

“All right, I got it. I’ll say this once more, but hiding it does not mean eating it, right? You’re not allowed to hide it inside your stomach, okay?”

“Of course, of course. And hiding it in my cleavage is also not allowed, of course.”

“Where on that little girl’s chest would there be any cleavage?”

It would be more realistic if she used two donuts to pad her chest—although you were limited to using only two for them.

“Although, even if you act illogically like that, there’s no way to recover from that… Since if you eat them while I’m not looking, it would be too late for me to do anything.”

“Your faith in me is very low!”

“All right. In the case that you cheat and do that, I’ll add the rule that you’ll be punished by me sticking my hand into your mouth and forcing you to vomit.”

“Like I said, I have no intention of doing so, so you’re free to add whatever rules you please, but my master, were you planning on eating donuts I vomited up?”

Shinobu seemed a little afraid of me.

Don’t look at me those eyes, when I’m your unmatched partner with our lives tied together and enwreathed in the same circumstances.

“…However, Shinobu. There’s still another problem. And it doesn’t have to do with cheating prevention, but a more realistic problem in regards to the game.”

“What is it?”

“You’re bound to my shadow, aren’t you? In that case, wouldn’t it be really hard to hide from me and be secretive in the first place?”

Though saying hide from me and be secretive was a weird way to say it—but as someone whose territory was limited to my shadow, there was no way for her to do anything hidden from me as long as I wasn't asleep. Or actually, maybe even when I was asleep. Although there was a period of time when our pairing, or tethering, had been broken…

"Well, I guess it's fine if I just close my eyes… Five minutes, or rather, until you say it's fine."

"No, in that case, the game would be over if you break your promise and open your eyes. Or you might peek with half-open eyes. Rejected, rejected. Did you think I'd have that much confidence in you?"

"…As I recall, when a certain someone was being doubted just a few moments ago, she was acting a little extreme."

"In that case, my master, should the punishment be me sticking my hand into your eyes and forcibly gouging them out?"

"That's a little extreme!"

"Well, I obviously can't do that, so the only choice is to use a blindfold."

And, as she said that.

Oshino Shinobu cheerfully removed the leggings she was wearing.

004

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line.

"Eh? What are you doing, Araragi-kun?"

"Er, Hanekawa. Um…"

"No matter who, what, or how you think about it. Is this time time to be doing something like this? Why are you playing around with Shinobu-chan?"

"No, no, as a matter of fact, you're completely right, and I feel completely the same way…"

"Araragi-kun, shouldn't you be studying right now?"

"……"

Was that what she was concerned about?

No, it was both of them.

"Using leggings as a blindfold? Pervert."

She straightforwardly insulted me.

It resounded in my heart.

“I’ll stop you there, Hanekawa. It’s not that I’m using these leggings as a blindfold on purpose. Blindfolding me with leggings, stuffing leggings into my mouth, it was all Shinobu’s doing.”

“Stuffing leggings into your mouth…?”

“Slip of the tongue.”

I may as well have stuffed my mouth with leggings.

There was no way that would have been the case.

“Ha, Hanekawa. I’m sure you have a great deal of things you want to lecture me about, but the charge for international phone calls is pretty high, isn’t it? There’s no time for that…”

“It’s fine. I have plenty of time.”

“……? Well, if you have time, then I have something that I want to ask you… Where do you think Shinobu hid the donuts?”

“That’s what you want to ask me? Not about the results of me looking for Oshino-san?”

“Let’s put that off for later.”

“Amazing. You’re so reliable.”

“Oh, stop it, you’re tickling my pride.”

“It’s even more amazing that my sarcasm didn’t get through to you.”

“I was able to find three of the donuts that she hid, but I couldn’t find the last one—I mean, it’s my room, right? There’s a limit to where you can hide stuff in here…”

“Hmm.”

“In that case, I can only think that Shinobu must have eaten it… but after saying that much, it’s hard to believe that she would go against the rules like that.”

“The strongest possibility is certainly that—but in the end, that would mean doubting Shinobu-chan. Well, if Araragi-kun says so, then she must have gone with the second strongest possibility.”

“The second strongest? So there was something I overlooked?”

“Why do you have faith in Shinobu-chan, but not me?… But I think that the possibility of you overlooking something in your own room is fairly low.”

“Oh. It looks like your faith in me is pretty high!”

“The possibility being low and my faith being high are two completely different things.”

“……”

Strict.

Hanekawa was strict towards perverts… Well, that made sense.

“So, what’s the second strongest possibility?”

“Araragi-kun? What did you do with the donuts you found? Out of the four that were hidden, the three that you found.”

“Of course, I ate them. That was the promise. So out of the five total donuts, I shared them with Shinobu with a ratio of 3:2.”

“Were they good?”

“Well, they were as Shinobu said… Is that related?”

“No, the taste doesn’t matter. I just wanted to see what Senjougahara’s patissier skill was like—but anyway, 4:1.”

“Hm?”

“It’s 4:1, the donut ratio. The ratio you shared them with. You ate four of them, Araragi-kun.”

“? No, I only ate three of them, though…”

“*I’m saying that the fourth donut was hidden in one of the three donuts*—they say if you want to hide a tree, hide it in a forest, but in this case, it would be more like the tree was hidden inside a tree.”

“……”

“You said the donuts had various sizes, right? Then, among the four remaining donuts, the smallest donut would have been hidden in the largest donut.”

“Eh… Hold on, you can’t do that, can you? Hiding a tree inside a tree…”

“Hiding a tree inside a tree would be impossible unless the inside was hollow. But you can do it with fried donuts, right? Regardless of the outside, the inside is soft enough. You can just press it in.”

“Press it in… B-but…”

That could certainly happen, but.

“The inside may be soft, but the outside is hard, you know? If you did something like that, then I would’ve seen it—”

“It wouldn’t have been noticed because they were torus donuts. See, Araragi-kun, *Shinobu-chan’s mouth was covered with cream* after eating one of the donuts—you said that earlier, remember? Basically, the donuts had to have used fresh cream, but if they were torus donuts, then the structure wouldn’t be like curry bread with the cream on the inside, right? The patterns I’m thinking of are either, the donuts were either decorated with cream on the outside, or the torus was split into two like a bagel with the cream in between. Whatever it was, it has to agree with your testimony when you said in the beginning that Shinobu-chan pinched the donut when picking it up. However, in the former case, if the outside had sugar on it then that would contradict your testimony, so the only possibility is the latter case—”

“……”

The information had leaked out from every little thing I uttered.

You sure are frightening, Hanekawa-san.

“If it’s the latter, then the donut was *split in two from the beginning*, so there would be no need to do anything to the outside. Rather, the cream could act as an adhesive after the other donut was pressed in, maybe? But anyway… I don’t have any evidence. Since you would have eaten the evidence, Araragi-kun.”

In that sense, you could say that Shinobu-chan hid the donuts in your stomach, Araragi-kun—finished Hanekawa.

Hm…

So that’s why, no matter how much I cross-examined her afterwards, she wouldn’t tell me about the hiding place… Of course it would be hard to say that she pulled such a trick on Senjougahara’s donuts for the sake of concealing them, and that she let me eat them for the sake of evidence destruction.

I had been looking at my shadow with critical eyes, but now I felt a little embarrassed. Without realizing that she had pulled such a trick, I had deliciously consumed the donuts without a second glance…

So that’s the reason Hanekawa asked about the taste—it wasn’t that she wanted to know about Senjougahara’s patissier skill.

I wondered.

Before talking about Senjougahara’s skill in cooking, I felt that I first had to refine my own taste—I felt that that reality had been thrust upon me.

“However… Isn’t that kind of bad?”

“Bad? It wasn’t cheating. It wasn’t like Shinobu-chan ate the donut herself.”

“Well, that’s what’s bad about it—wasn’t Shinobu’s motive to eat the donuts? Even so, by having me eat them instead, isn’t that putting the cart before the horse? She never fulfilled her motive—”

“That’s the point, Araragi-kun.”

“Hm?”

“Basically—abandoning her motives and personal gain. Not taking into account her own self-centered opinions. To put it another way, being completely selfless, even at the risk of one’s life. That’s the point that Shinobu-chan was teaching you about.”

“…About what, negotiations? Secrecy?”

“About love.”



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1
January

Koyomi Seed

001

Did Ononoki Yotsugi even differentiate paths from those which were not paths? I always think about that question—she wasn't someone that was tied down by the laws of gravity or buoyancy or the lift force. I couldn't help but think that, because the living things called humans that bustled around her mainly alternated their left and right feet as a means of movement, Ononoki Yotsugi was simply imitating that.

It was only because humanity happened to use walking as a means of movement that she was mimicking them without any deep thought or reason, and if the trend in humanity was to get to places by crawling, I'm sure Ononoki Yotsugi would also start crawling to get around without thinking anything of it.

For her, there was no meaning in anything being logical—it was unrealistic things, not logical things, that held stronger meaning.

It was what was unrealistic for sure that was an appropriate way of life for the shikigami Ononoki Yotsugi—as she was an oddity and wasn't exactly a living thing, you couldn't exactly say she had a way of life, but from the point of view of stubbornly chasing after goals that can't be reached, you could say it wasn't a way of life but a way of loathing.

"For me, the safest means of movement is neither walking nor flying through the air—I would say it's going underground."

When was it again?

When I went along with her on a high altitude transportation via her 'rulebook filled mostly with exceptions [Unlimited Rulebook]'—it was up to the observer if they wanted to choose between calling it jumping or flying—or rather, when I was forced to go along with her, she explained it like that.

Without any intonation.

And perhaps even without any context.

With a monotone that could have been a failed imitation of someone, she explained it to me.

"Digging through the ground like a mole—I would say that's the safest means of movement. That's what I think."

If it wasn't a joke with the punch line being a play on the words shortcut and underground passage, then I had no idea what she was trying to say.[26]

Safest.

The underground could certainly be considered safe.

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[26] 'Shortcut' = 'chikamichi', 'underground passage' = 'chikadou'.

And especially for someone like her, who saw combat as an inevitability, the safety that was indispensable for her could be found there.

There—the bottom of the earth.[27]

There could be safety that couldn't be found aboveground.

After all, if all four directions around you and even above you were sealed in, there was no need to worry about any surprise attacks—if you wanted to get the most speed, then it would naturally be uncovered air travel, but if your surroundings had no cover, then it essentially meant that your surroundings had no protection.

That must be why Ononoki Yotsugi was saying that underground travel was safer—was how I interpreted it, but to my reasoning, Ononoki Yotsugi silently shook her head.

She expressionlessly shook her head.

And then she spoke in a monotone.

"That's wrong. It's because there are no humans around."

Because there are no humans around.

Because there was nothing to imitate, for that reason, there was nothing to be influenced by.

It was where she could be herself the most.

002

"Ah. The oni onii-chan. In short, oni-i-chan. It's a complete surprise that I'm meeting you here. Yay."

"……"

"Hey, why are you trying to ignore me like that. That sort of action won't be good my upbringing. If I stray from the right path, how do you plan on taking responsibility for it for onee-chan, yay."

"……"

As Ononoki-chan moved with lightning speed to block me as I turned around to return down the path I had come, all the while obstinately continuing her sideways peace signs as if I was some television camera, I felt that, even though this wasn't something I would say about one of my female friends, I was a little fed up.

I was fed up and annoyed.

Well, don't misunderstand me.

It wasn't that I was fed up with Ononoki-chan—it was a little hard to hide my being fed up with her 'yay sideways peace signs' that she had picked up somewhere, but

[27] 'There' and 'bottom' = 'soko'.

fundamentally, my opinion of this shikigami oddity, this tsukumogami employed by a specialist, Ononoki Yotsugi, was favorable.

And her calling me the oni onii-chan or oni-i-chan as a nickname was due to my history as a vampire, and I definitely did not want to take any brutish actions against Ononoki-chan—be nice to little girls.

That was my catchphrase.

However, if it was the worst possible thing to meet the person you didn't want to meet at the worst timing, then what would you call meeting the person you did want to meet at the worst timing?—and this timing was certainly one of those timings. I guess I could say I was fed up.

To say it concretely.

It was the middle of January.

I was returning from the National Center Test—we had finished filling up the second day's scantron in the assembly hall, and had taken the train back to our town.

I had walked Senjougahara to her home and was making my way back on foot—and around the halfway point between the Senjougahara and Araragi households, I had gotten into an encounter with a young girl.

It was too good of a timing… It almost felt like I had been ambushed, but, well, even if I had reason to ambush Ononoki-chan, I didn't think there was any reason for Ononoki-chan to ambush me, so it was probably a coincidence. There was no mistake.

"Hey, what are you doing now, oni-i-chan."

"Hm?"

"Hey, hey, hey."

Ononoki-chan beckoned towards me.

No, that body language didn't exactly seem like beckoning—it seemed like she was urging me to do something, but body language was fundamentally a language where communication occurred only with some level of mutual understanding.

In the first place, when your partner is an oddity then it's hard enough to get a mutual understanding, but in Ononoki-chan's case, she didn't even have expressions—in terms of kanji, it would be the obscure kanji that wasn't in the regular-use Jouyou set.

In other words, I couldn't read her.

"Yay."

"Hold on, don't mix in the peace signs. That just makes the catcher signals that I can hardly read even more complicated."

"Give me a break. Seems like everyone has something to say about my peace signs."

"Everyone? Was there someone besides me that complained about them? Who was it?"

"That's a secret."

“So it’s a secret.”

“Of course. There’s nothing I have to tell you. Know your place.”

“……”

What.

I may have stepped carelessly into the topic of her private life, but did I have to be rejected so firmly…?

“Get to know your place.”

“Get to know? You mean, get to know Ononoki-chan? Well, I don’t know how to put it, but this is kind of a passionate approach…”

“So this body language. And these gestures.”

And, though I had thought no progress would be made, Ononoki-chan began to explain. Even though I was the one thinking no progress would be made…

Or rather, it seemed like her body language and gestures were completely different from what she was doing before… Was this puppet just doing whatever came to mind at that moment?

“The meaning of it is that 'there’s something I’m searching for at the moment, so if you have time, could you help me? Oni-i-chan.’”

“How could I understand that!?”

Don’t try to portray such a complicated request with just two fingers!

Do you think I’m a telepath or something!?

“Telepath? Aren’t you confusing that with derepath?”

“What sort of attribute is that? Some sort of variation on tsundere?”

“So how about it. Are you going to help me, or are you not going to help me: say it clearly. If you aren’t going to help, then leave this place at once.”

“……”

Her wording…

Her manner of speech…

Who is it, the person responsible for her upbringing—or rather, as an oddity, Ononoki-chan was the one being influenced by her surroundings.

It was possible that recently, she was associating with some bad guy—this girl was the very definition of 'one rotten apple spoils the bunch’.

Seriously, she should choose better friends—but as I thought that, I wondered if it was my place to say that. It’s not like my number of associates amounted to more than six.

“I do want to help you, but…”

Something she was searching for.

So I had managed to encounter her by chance when she was searching for something—if that was the case.

“But, right now, I just took an exam and I’m exhausted—and after going over my answers at Senjougahara’s place, I have a lot to do.”

That was the worst timing I was talking about—I didn’t feel like meeting anyone or talking to anyone, not just Ononoki Yotsugi.

I really wanted to go back home and review the problems I missed and conquer my weak areas—to be honest, I didn’t realy have the time to stop and talk to Ononoki-chan like this, let alone help her search.

“Exam? Oh. Is that the Center Test you talked about before? Back in my day, it was called the common first-stage exam.”

“Hold on, a little girl like you shouldn’t be saying something that someone from an older generation would definitely say.”

Really, who are you being influenced by?

“Before it used to be the 'first-stage’ exam, and now it’s the 'Center’ test, but what kind of name change is that. Isn’t the meaning the complete opposite. I wonder if it’s a problem of naming rights.

"It’s more of a problem when something changes due to naming rights!”

“The scantron, right? I know about it. Ahem. Yay.”

“……”

It was amazing that she knew about it already, but the person who told her about it was probably me. I remembered telling her about it at the same time I 'talked about it before’.

“But so what. Your exam’s already over, right? Why are you trying to act busy now. I don’t have the time to play along with your 'I’m so busy’ appeal, oni-i-chan.”

“Er… I never did anything like that, an 'I’m so busy’ appeal.”

Or had I unconsciously given off that impression?

As I thought that that couldn’t have happened, I said this.

“To be honest, the results of my scantron weren’t very good. At this point, if I don’t give myself an extra boost, it won’t end well.”

“Hmm… Well, oni-i-chan is a good enough warrior like that. On the scantron, you wouldn’t try to fill in the answer using your intuition for a problem you didn’t underestand. If it were me, I’d gamble on the one out of five probability, but oni-i-chan would bravely leave it blank.”

“I wouldn’t do that!”

I wasn’t that brave.

Rather, I lived pretty ignobly.

If not for that, I wouldn't have been able to live my life so carelessly this entire year.

"It's just that my intuition is bad. On the problems where I did gamble on the one out of five probability, I got them all wrong."

"Yay. That's not it, wow."

It seemed she mixed up the order of her reaction and her favorite phrase.

Although what kind of favorite phrase was that?

"That's amazing. Even if it's a one out of five probability, if you studied normally you could narrow it down to at least one out of three or even one out of two. Even though it's like that, oni-i-chan, what were you doing this whole year. It would be better if you died."

"....."

Why do you have to be that bitter?

And as for you, what sort of friend di you make between the last time we met and now?

"This whole year, I was attacked by a vampire and I was nearly killed by a cat and a girl fell on me and I got lost and I was kicked by a monkey and I was wrapped around by a snake and I was deceived by a con man and my sister was targeted and I got into a time slip and I was attacked by the darkness and now I only have half a year left to live. When was I supposed to study, damn it!"

"I never said you should study, but it would be better if you died."

"At any rate, don't try to kill me."

"As long as you won't cooperate with helping me search, oni-i-chan, I'll continue to abuse you. I'll continue to tell you to go and die."

"Stop it. How do you expect me to cooperate with you after that?"

"So you won't help me?"

"Did you think I would?"

"You unhelpful bastard."

"Don't try to say something cool like 'you ungrateful bastard'. Nothing's been decided yet. All right, all right."

I posed as if I had given in.

Unlike Ononoki-chan earlier, there was no body language that was easier to understand than this.

"It's my loss, I'll cooperate with you, I'll help out. With Ononoki-chan's search. Is it somewhere around here?"

"Well, it's not limited to just here."

"....."

She had kind of a prickly attitude.

Wasn’t she going to thank me, this girl?

Well, if I had the free time to argue about that, it was probably more efficient to start looking for what Ononoki-chan was searching for and say sayonara to peace and quiet.

Instead of worrying about how Ononoki-chan’s search went in the future, I’ll resolve my concerns here and now—then I’d be able to make better progress in my studying afterwards.

……

It was because of this kind of on-the-spot thinking that made it so that my studying time was snatched away from me, wasn’t it—something along the lines of, if I cleaned my room before studying then it would make me more efficient, and so on.

Well, in any case, it was a ship I had already boarded—I couldn’t say I was going to quit now. First and foremost, Ononoki-chan had her last resort, the 'rulebook filled mostly with exceptions [Unlimited Rulebook]’.

If she used that, it would be a cinch to force me to say or listen to anything she wanted—the secret of success was to comply with the other party before they went all out with their trump card.

It was my usual measure to defend against that trump card.

Even though it sounded cool, it certainly wasn’t cool at all…

“Well, if it’s not limited to just here, let’s look for it with that in mind. Ononoki-chan. What are we looking for?”

“Well, I wonder.”

“……”

“Yay.”

“…Yay.”

I wanted to go home, yay.

003

In the end, I had found myself helping out with Ononoki-chan’s search despite not even knowing what she was searching for—there had been a point when Sengoku Nadeko had been looking for a ‘body of worship’, but this was even more aimless than that. I had no idea how she had come to that, but the truth was the truth.

And I had made no progress in my questioning.

Or rather, as a matter of fact, it seemed that Ononoki-chan herself was only vaguely aware of what she was looking for—she had tried to talk her way out of it, but though our friendship may have been short, it certainly wasn’t superficial.

Furthermore, it seemed she was taking orders from someone, and was basing her search on some ambiguous information, like:

“When you see it, you’ll apparently be able to tell in a single glance—”

With that line, I had managed to see the situation.

Well, rather than see the situation, it would be more hear the situation. Basing a search on ambiguous information and words like 'apparently’ was normally impossible for normal humans, but as a shikigami oddity, if I had to say it then it was the usual for her.

A task with an unknown purpose, and a search with an unknown target.

As she was just a usable good under the ownership of a specialist, she wasn’t even allowed to ask any questions to her owner, or something—but anyway.

Despite not being under anyone’s ownership, and despite not necessarily being not allowed to ask questions, I had still ended up conducting a search based on such ambiguous information.

It was almost as if I was the shikigami oddity—but rather than being used by a specialist, I was actually being used by a shikigami, and it made no sense.

What position did that put me in, in this case?

“I’ve already done a single sweep of this area—I was thinking I’d try another place and look there.”

“Is that so… That’s a shame.”

If the train had made me just a step late, I might have been able to avoid this encounter and be on my way—it was really unfortunate.

“Ah, I’m saying this just for your sake, but by single sweep, I’m not referring to you, oni-i-chan.”

“Who’s the kidnapper here!?”[28]

“On top of searching, there’s something else I want you to help me with, oni-i-chan.”

She completely ignored my retort.

It was against good manners for the funny man to ignore the straight man. Or maybe she had never ratified that treaty. Or perhaps she had actually thought that I was a kidnapper.

“It’s about expanding my field of vision.”

“Field of vision?”

“Since I had reached my limits—I was starting to think I’d need to change my point of view.”

“…No, well, whatever you start thinking about is completely up to you, but if it’s something that has to do with me, I’d like it if you clearly told me what you wanted me to do. The point is, in a search, you’re saying it’ll be better with more eyes, right?”

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[28] 'Single sweep' and 'kidnapper' = 'hitosarai'.

“Well, I wonder if it would be better.”

“Stop with those kinds of responses. This isn’t the occasion for raising my temper.”

“It’s not the occasion for raising your temper? Then what should be raised? A flag?”

“There wouldn’t be any flags to raise with a little girl!”

“So when you talk about raising flags… It’s hard to judge whether that flag is a Z flag or a white flag, isn’t it.”

“……”

For a shikigami girl that often seemed robotic in her movements and thoughts, far from occasionally, she frequently seemed to have her priorities out of order—although, it wasn’t like I was one to judge others’ priorities considering I was helping out with a girl’s search while I should be studying—but there was no mistake that arguing about whether we were raising a Z flag or a white flag would have a fairly low priority.

There wasn’t any easier judgment to make than that.

“Well, rather than increasing the number eyes, I was thinking I wanted to change my viewpoint. Since I’m, by nature, an adorable doll. I’m tiny.”

“Tiny?”

“So while I was searching, I was lacking in height. See, if you were under pressure when searching in a room, you’d be able to get a view of high places like on top of chairs and desks, right? Taller people are better suited to searches.”

“Hmm… Well, I suppose that’s the case, if it’s a matter of the point of view. If what you were looking for was hiding behind something, then it might be easier to find from a higher angle…”

But that wasn’t true in every case.

If your body was tiny—you’d be able to slip into smaller places more easily, so there are times when a lower point of view could actually be better in a search.

It seemed likely that the girl’s owner thought that this search needed a lower point of view and thus ordered her to do this—but as she had reached her limits, Ononoki-chan had ended up asking for my cooperation.

“But Ononoki-chan. I certainly do have a higher point of view than you… But that’s only in relative terms, and in absolute terms, I’m not actually that tall, you know?”

“I can see that. I can see that even from my low point of view. You’re definitely not on the tall side, oni-i-chan.”

“In absolute terms. In absolute terms, all right?”

“Well, you’re absolutely an enemy, oni-i-chan.”[29]

“Wrong. I’m your ally!”

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[29] 'Absolute terms' = 'zettaiteki', 'absolute enemy' = 'zettai teki'.

“The problem is that viewpoint of yours.[30] There certainly wouldn’t be a big difference using your height… But oni-i-chan. Since you’re a high-school student, you should know basic math and addition, right?”

“I think even people who aren’t high-school students would know that much.”

“As a mathematical girl, I obviously know it as well.”

“Mathematical girl…”

Wasn’t that a book on Japanese mathematics from a long time ago?

That’s.

That’s pretty amazing for Japan.

To think that there was the concept of a mathematical girl even before the existence of magical girls—it seemed that this country’s pop culture has surprisingly not changed since all that long ago.

“Though I never imagined that you’d be a mathematical girl, Ononoki-chan.”

“That’s rude. Do you want me to provide evidence? Like what the largest prime number is.”

“Just by talking about the largest prime number, I can tell your mathematical literacy is zero.”

“The person that discovered that zero is actually me.”

“As if!”

“But right now we’re talking about addition. If we add together my considerably short height with your fairly short height, we can miraculously, miraculously in an oddity-like way, end up with a pretty tall height. Specifically it’ll be around three meters.”

“……”

Putting aside the fact that she would so straightforwardly and blunty call me fairly short—well, if I translate Ononoki-chan’s mechanical way of speaking in a way that anyone with my level of Japanese could understand, then I’d say she was asking for a piggyback ride.

It was an entreaty from an adorable doll.[31]

Well, three meters might be an exaggeration, but our height would at least cross two meters, so we would definitely be capable of performing a search completely different from what Ononoki-chan had been doing up until now—huh, I guess this would be the young girl’s piggyback event.

It wasn’t something I had desired in the slightest, and it wasn’t like the melancholy from my exams would be cleared up with such an event, but if I wanted to get back home as soon as possible, then I had no choice.

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[30] 'Ally' and 'viewpoint' = 'mikata'.

[31] 'Adorable' and 'entreaty' = 'aigan'.

If I wanted to break the flag I had raised, it seemed I had to give this girl a piggyback ride.

Wait, hold on?

I feel like something like this happened before, too.

Speaking of piggyback events, there was some crazy event in which I had the one to get a piggyback ride—it had become a town rumor.

What am I supposed to with gossip like that?

At the very least, make it a vampire legend.

It was certainly true that, as a shikigami oddity, Ononoki-chan had the physical strength to give me a piggyback ride, but in this case, I would be the one giving Ononoki-chan the piggyback ride, right—there had to be a balance in things. It was complying with that balance that preserved the way of the world.

However, my partner was Ononoki-chan, who lacked in common sense.

Outside of common knowledge, Ononoki-chan was also lacking in forethought and human nature—so I should probably confirm it with her. I wanted to go as far as have her write and submit a report… But since there was no time for that, I guess I had to verbalize my question.

Both ways seemed a little overanxious, though.

Rather than being overanxious, I could say it was a waste of effort—but the regrettable fact was that what Ononoki-chan responded with was a completely inhuman response.

“Ononoki-chan. There’s something I want to confirm.”

“Something you want to confirm? If you’re going to say that you want to know how my embrace feels, say it after my duties are over.”

“You don’t have to say such a stylish response… When you say addition, you mean I’m going to give you a piggyback ride, right? Even if you have superhuman strength, Ononoki-chan, it would look better if we did that, right? So that we don’t look conspicuous in a bad way?”

“I can feel from your question that you have reasons other than not wanting to look conspicuous.”

After a preface that made it seem like she was strangely in touch with humans’ emotions despite being a shikigami oddity,

“That’s wrong, oni-i-chan,”

she said.

“Eh? What did you say?”

“That’s wrong, oni.”

“Add the i-chan to it!”

“Don’t give me your complaints. You see, oni-i-chan. I’m not going to piggyback you.”

“Eh?”

“I’m not going to firmly embrace your head with my thighs or anything.”

“You can just say you’re not going to piggyback me. If you’re going to repeat something, say it the same way you did the first time.”

“I’m not going to piggyback you, and I’m not going to give you a piggyback ride either. Think about it, if we piggyback then there’s a loss, isn’t there?”

“A loss?”

“No matter who piggybacks who, one of us will end up sitting on the neck of the other, right? When we sit, the only thing we can add is our sitting height. Oni-i-chan, you may have some pride when it comes to your sitting height, but it’s not like your sitting height plus your legs will ever be lower than just your sitting height, right?”

“What kind of person has their sitting height plus their legs lower than their sitting height? Is the length of their legs in the negative?”

“The person that discovered negative numbers was also me, by the way.”

“Sounds like you may as well get the Fields Prize. Better yet, you can establish the Ononoki Prize.”

“The Ononoki Prize. That has a nice ring to it.”

“So by a loss, you’re saying that piggybacking will not give us the height that you’re looking for—but even if you say that, Ononoki-chan. That’s a loss that can’t be avoided, right? I don’t think there is anything outside of piggybacking, or rather, anything better than piggybacking, that can increase our height. Even if I held you up, you would only get up to as far as the same height that I am.”

“That’s not holding me up. That’s holding me close.”

“Well, then even if I held you up and played airplane with you.”

“Even if I am a little girl, I don’t really like being treated that much like a kid. …What, it’s really simple, oni-i-chan. We just need to do the same thing that I’ve always been doing.”

“What you’ve always been doing?”

“You might be able to guess if I say, what someone has always had me do.”

“……?”

I couldn’t guess.

Or rather, I didn’t want to guess.

004

A few minutes later.

I was standing with a very high point of view.

Or rather, I was standing on top of Ononoki-chan—I was on top of the finger that Ononoki-chan had thrust upwards as if to point at the sky.

"……"

I had no idea what exactly her main role was as the shikigami of a specialist—but the usual work she carried out appeared to be that of a 'chauffeur'.

Of course, a little girl couldn't actually drive—but as she was employed by a specialist who had the restriction of 'not being able to walk on the ground', even if that specialist couldn't walk on the ground, she could still be carried around on Ononoki-chan's finger or shoulders or head.

Ononoki-chan was kind of incredible to carry a human around like luggage, but that specialist was also incredible to be carried around like luggage, was what I thought—but I had never thought that I would be carried around by Ononoki-chan like that.

Well, really…

If it's like this, then there wouldn't be a loss…

Well, regardless of whether I had the confidence or not to do such a thing, I was able to use the full length of my legs without losing a single centimeter, and adding the length of Ononoki-chan's arm onto that, I was able to stand at the height of the 'three meters' that Ononoki-chan had said from the start.

Before, when I had been given a piggyback ride, my point of view had been quite high, but this was even more than that—well, if we had to do it like this, then it would be impossible for me to be on the bottom, but… Normally it would be impossible to be on the top, either.

To stand on a single finger.

Was I a basketball?

…Well, at least I wasn't being spun around on her finger, but as someone who didn't exactly have the greatest sense of balance, being able to stand even in an unstable way like this was more because she was adjusting the balance on her end.

I felt a little bit like we were some kind of circus attraction, though it wasn't the time for that.

But in proportion to that little bit, it was a little funny.

"…Even when you carry that other person around, are you the one that controls the balance?"

"No, I don't need to do that when I carry onee-chan. Her way of riding is pretty unique—but I still need to be careful that I don't mess up and drop her."

If I dropped her, she wouldn't just be half angry with me, said Ononoki-chan.

"Oh, so she wouldn't just be half angry…"

So it would be panaino, wouldn't it.

Incidentally, Shinobu was sleeping at the moment.

There was a bit of discord between Ononoki-chan and Shinobu, so if she was awake, it was possible she was pretending to be asleep—an oni shouldn't pretend to be a tanuki. That's an unbelievable drop in rank for an oddity.

"Because even she fell from her mistake, she'd still make it my fault. It's tough because even if I don't use any techniques, I still have to pay attention. So in that sense, it's easier on my mind to carry you around, oni-i-chan, since you won't complain even if I drop you."

"Sorry, Ononoki-chan, I'm glad you say that, but I'm not that perfect of a person."

In that way, she was putting me pretty high up.

I wouldn't come out of being dropped unhurt, but if I wasn't hurt too bad to the point of losing consciousness or in danger of dying, I would definitely complain as much as I could to Ononoki-chan, the one who dropped me.

"……"

The one who dropped me, huh.

"Hey, Ononoki-chan. So, if we're going to continue searching like this."

"You sure resign yourself to the situation easily, oni-i-chan."

"At least say I'm quick to change my mind!"

"As said by oni-i-chan, who is famous for his catchphrase, 'there's no need to solve problems that I don't understand.'"

"What kind of person like that would succeed in any exams!?"

No.

Well, Senjougahara had said that skipping a problem that you didn't understand was a crucial technique during entrance exams—but at that point, Hanekawa had asserted her miraculous technique of 'if you solve the harder problems first, everything after that will by easy.' It was too miraculous.

"Since we're far past the level of looking conspicuous, so I'd like to find it quickly… But as for what we're searching for, is it something that someone dropped?"

"Huh?"

"Don't say 'huh' at me, Ononoki-chan… But anyway, is it something that someone dropped, or something along those lines that we're looking for?"

"I wonder. Because I'm a girl that does only what I'm told, I do only what I'm told."

"If you're going to name an attribute, make it a little easier to say. But if you're searching for something, it's usually something that someone dropped, right?"

"That's not always true. It's not always limited to things that someone dropped like how I'm going to drop oni-i-chan in the future."

"Don't make such an ominous foreshadowing!"

“It could be searching for something that somebody hid somewhere, or something that was lost in some kind of accident. You’re free to make your own inferences, but I’d like it if you stopped confusing the situation with your hasty judgments.”

“……”

She sure is sharp…

Even though she herself didn’t know what we were looking for.

“If it’s something that you can tell in a single glance, then does that mean even someone like me will be able to tell in a single glance? Since you’re holding me up here like some fire lookout, that seems to be the case… Sorry if I’m misunderstanding anything, but recently I’ve been using a lot of my vampire powers, so if you’re expecting some kind of oddity-like eyesight, I can’t really live up to that.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not expecting anything from you, oni-i-chan.”

“…Then, why are you holding me up like some fire lookout? Why are you hoisting me up like I’m a portable shrine?”

“Right. So the reason I’m, ho ho ho! -isting you up, oni-i-chan…”

“Don’t just suddenly mix in a laugh like that.”

“…Even if you don’t have the eyesight of an oddity, you should be able to see it. So, oni-i-chan, please move your eyes here and there like a weather vane.”

“Should I tell you if I think I might fall?”

“Don’t think about that. Just concentrate on your eyes, oni-i-chan.”

“……”

How did I end up taking orders from a little girl… I suppose when humans’ wills weaken, they end up taking the easy way out.

Well, I wasn’t completely sure if doing exactly as a little girl says was the easy way out…

“Anyway, it doesn’t have to be completely incomprehensible, but if something catches your eye or seems a little weird, then I should like it if you reported it to me.”

“You should like it…”

As always, her character was getting blurred.

It was a little impressive that that violent onmyouji was able to employ this blurry shikigami—how did she control her?

I suppose it had to be with violence.

Depending on the situation, that could potentially be called domestic violence.

“Something that catches my eye or seems a little weird… But our own appearance reflected in a mirror would be an exception, right?”

“Cut the sarcasm. I’m busy right now.”

“……”

She wouldn’t even let me start a conversation.

I was wondering how the simple task of carrying me made her busy, but it seemed that one top of carrying me, she was also examining the surroundings. Though she should have searched around this area once before, I guess she was the kind of person that liked to be on sure ground before she accused—well, that phrase had a slightly different meaning.

“It’s not like I particularly have any free time right now.”

“Are you talking about how you were only given half a year to live?”

Said Ononoki-chan as she was both carrying me and continuing her search—though that remaining half a year had decreased considerably by now. Could my bad results in the Center Test also be because of that?“

”……“

"Well, what you’re probably worrying about, oni-i-chan, is not the remainder of your life—not that, but your bride, right?”[32]

“Don’t just suddenly put in a pun during a serious conversation!”

“I wasn’t making a pun, I wanted to have some playful banter.”

“Don’t put in any banter, either!”

“What? So what you wanted to put in was your head in my thighs after all? In that case, it’s a shame, because my thighs aren’t really that thick. Sorry, oni-i-chan, who likes women with curves.”

“I’m going to kill you!”

To be abused this much by a little girl.

“There are more things that you have to apologize to me for, Ononoki-chan.”

“Eh? Then you don’t like women with curves?”

“That’s a completely different topic. Also, Senjougahara isn’t my wife yet.

"Oho. But I never mentioned Senjougahara.”

“Hm? You weren’t talking about her? Then was it about Shinobu?”

“No, it was about Senjougahara.”

“If you want some playful banter, at least make it playful—also, don’t refer to Senjougahara so casually. It’s not like you’ve ever met her.”

“No, I haven’t.”

Said Ononoki-chan as she turned a corner.

[32] 'Remaining life' = 'yomei', 'bride' = 'yome'.

Where exactly was she going? It happeend to be exact opposite direction of my house… Would I be able to return home by today? The sense of distance and time was different for humans and oddities, after all…

It would at least help if we knew where we were supposed to be searching… From what I could see of Ononoki-chan's movements since a while ago, I could tell that not even that was clear.

It wasn't limited to here or wherever else.

It was certainly like that violent onmyouji to do so, but her way of giving instructions was very rough—although, considering the earlier incidents, it isn't necessarily that violent onmyouji that employs Ononoki-chan, right?

If it was the boss of the specialists, then—

"How much time is left, again? Of your remaining life, oni-i-chan. Which ends first, your life or your exams?"

"You sure aren't delicate in your questions. Straightforward and blunt."

No.

In this case, you could say it was candid—it was comforting in its own way to see her being this candid instead of weirdly worrying about me.

"It's kind of hard to say. The exams themselves end first. But then I have the graduation ceremony, and the results come out after that."

"You could say you're a little lucky."

"How could I say that?"

"When you say you've been using a lot of your vampire powers, that's also part of it, right? You've been constantly repeating a useless effort, or rather, a useless defeat, right?"

"It's not useless…"

But it was true that I wasn't getting any results.

Or rather, it might be having the opposite effect—it might be time to reconsider the plan of recklessly throwing myself in every time I recover.

"To think that a plan of recklessly throwing yourself in every time you recover exists in this world."

Ononoki-chan shrugged her shoulders.

With that motion, I felt like I was about to fall from her fingertip.

"I don't have anything in response to that…"

"I thought that the only person that would come up with such a plan in this world was onee-chan."

"So it does exist in this world!"

Well, I suppose she would think of it.

Although, since the snake god isn't an immortal oddity, the person whose area of expertise was immortal oddities wouldn't show up now—and Ononoki-chan was the same.

Hm.

But before, one reason for the deification of snakes was their immortal quality, based on the biological phenomenon of shedding their skin—um, who was it that I heard this from again?

My memory was so vague, I couldn't piece it together.

Recently, this has been happening quite often.

Maybe I was studying too hard.

"For the time being, Hanekawa has been going around the world, looking for Oshino—unfortunately, it doesn't seem like she's been getting results."

"Oh. Oshino-onii-chan, huh. I haven't seen him in a while, either."

"Hmm..."

Where could he be, really?

That dissolute and unruly man—Hanekawa had gone overseas to search, but I didn't think that guy even had a passport...

"Hey, oni-i-chan. What do you plan on doing from now on? If you wanted to, it's not like I can't contact Gaen-san like I've done before, you know?"

"No..."

Well, it wasn't like I wanted to contact her. After all, it was her 'friendly' request that had brought on this situation—well, I shouldn't try to blame this on anyone.

But even if I wasn't blaming anyone, if I had to blame anything—it would be the talisman that she had entrusted to me that was the source.

The root of all evil.

"...Besides, even if you say that, it was against her intentions that I hadn't been using the talisman. Thinking about it like that, I can't rely on her now."

"You don't have to say that. As friends, you never know how flexible she might be when listening."

"Well, I've heard that she isn't a bad person... But she asks for a lot of repayment or collateral from her friends."

Well, if it's in exchange for my and Senjougahara's lives, I should be ready to sacrifice anything—but in this case, the compensation would at the very least be Oshino Shinobu, and in the worst case, Sengoku Nadeko.

That was unreasonable.

If I could make such a decision, then I wouldn't have fallen into this situation in the first place—I've repeatedly acknowledged that it wasn't the case for expressions that made full use of rhetoric, but as I couldn't make levelheaded decisions, there was no other plan I could use but to fight hotheadedly.

"Well, that's true. Gaen-san is someone where if you rely on her carelessly, you'll be in for a bad time later. If there's something you want to protect, you're better off not relying on her."

"That's right… Rather than just better off, I'm avoiding a huge calamity by it."

"In the first place… The fact that Gaen-san hasn't contacted you first means that she has no intentions of helping you, oni-i-chan."

"Then it's impossible."

"What's amazing about Gaen-san is that she doesn't go around taking on impossible requests from her friends."

"That's a little too sensible of her!"

"But isn't Oshino-onii-chan the same way? Even if that Hanekawa Tsubasa girl managed to find him, he won't necessary help, right? He'll say something like, 'I won't help, on their own only people can help themselves, little girl.'"

"What's with Oshino's baby talk? What kind of country has he been living in?"

"You probably won't be able to listen to a conversation with my monotone and Oshino's baby talk, huh."

"If you can think that, you should first fix your monotone!"

"This can't be fixed."

She asserted.

It was a strangely forceful assertion for her—though it was still in a monotone, there was a sense of discomfort within that monotone.

I wonder why.

Maybe her character was blurring again.

"…Well, Oshino certainly might say that—but Hanekawa's search for Oshino is still a consolation for me. Hanekawa's using this as an opportunity to scout for locations, too."

Well, I suppose it wasn't exactly an opportunity, but I wasn't expecting any more from it.

"In the end, I can only do this by myself. Since I was the one to have sown the seeds, I'll be the one to do something about them."

"If you were really the one to have sown the seeds, then you certainly should."

"Hm? Are you saying that they're seeds sown by someone else? But I wouldn't think that's the case."

"Of course you wouldn't—after all, seeds are hidden underground."

Until they sprouted, you wouldn't notice their existence—said Ononoki-chan.

"But don't you think it's kind of strange? How around here, everything around only oni-i-chan is in chaos, like someone is trying to regain balance, or find the right answers—"

"……"

"Even when you meet an oddity and are pulled in by it—but it's like even that itself is being balanced, isn't it? I don't think oni-i-chan is dense enough to think that that isn't unnatural."

"…I am that dense. Because I'm always completely overwhelmed by trying to fix the situation—but I've finally at the end of my rope."

I said.

Well, even if she was an oddity, it wasn't exactly cool to complain to this little girl, and even taking that into account, I shouldn't be putting Ononoki-chan into a dilemma when she was ultimately on that person's side, so I figured I should end things here.

Thinking that, I turned the conversation back to the search.

"I can't see anything that seems like it would be it… Are you sure it's around here somewhere? Ononoki-chan."

"You don't need to tell me when there's nothing there. Report when you have results."

"Even if you say that…"

That wasn't the right attitude to take for someone who was helping you free of charge, or rather, spending his valuable time to help you…

"Something you can tell with a single glance, huh—I wonder what it is."

"Me too. I don't have the slightest idea, even after hearing it… But, oni-i-chan, there's something that I've been thinking could be a possibility."

"Oh? What is it?"

"Something that anyone could tell with a single glance—but once you start looking for it, you'll lose sight of it. That is."

Ononoki-chan.

Looking up at me—she said.

"It's a smile!"

She said, monotonously.

She said, expressionlessly.

"……"

If it was true, I wanted to find it for her as soon as possible.

005

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line.

Well, in this case, far from there being a punch line, it was more like nothing had occurred in the first place, and it's not like the story of conducting a search while being carried by a young girl's finger could be called an oddity story, let alone your average everyday mystery.

But in the end, though we aimlessly wandered through the town until evening, we couldn't find anything, and the results were that we couldn't obtain any results, so there was nothing to laugh at—you could almost say that Ononoki-chan and I had simply gone for a walk.

"We couldn't find it, huh. It can't be helped. Well, bye bye. bye bye-yay."

With more sideways peace signs, she left. She didn't even seem dejected that she hadn't found what she was looking for—rather, despite being expressionless, it almost felt like she was satisfied just by having been able to work all day.

Was she perhaps being paid hourly?

Regardless of whether she had results, it's fine if she works for the same amount of time… At the very least, I hadn't perceived any intention from her to work unpaid overtime.

Well, a shikigami paid by piecework wouldn't slack off…

In any case, after that, having been apathetically abandoned, I went home as if nothing had happened and resumed my studying as if nothing had happened—but even so, due to my mental fatigue from the exam I had taken during the day, and my physical fatigue from helping out with Ononoki-chan's search, I had fallen asleep long before the night had deepened.

On the way home, I had frolicked about with a girl, and then fell asleep after getting home?

Oi, oi.

Something like that could barely be called a story let alone have a sequel, and it hardly made for an episode that preceded an epilogue, and it felt more like an intro quiz instead of any kind of outro—and thinking that was understandable, but the person who found the solution to this unsolvable quiz was, and you might say 'none other than', or 'as expected', or even 'really? her again?', but it was Hanekawa Tsubasa.

Well, I did think that Hanekawa's deduction rate was way too high, but I would like for you to understand that this was simply the difference in our knowledge and intelligence. But it wasn't as if I was solely relying on Hanekawa for help.

But for Hanekawa, immediately after I spoke to her, she didn't tell me anything—'Hm. So something like that happened. Was that really it?' was all I was told.

I didn’t think that response was all that unnatural—I had just normally thought that 'that can’t possibly be it’. Because that couldn’t possibly be it, I didn’t think it was unnatural.

That is, I didn’t notice.

The effort of Ononoki-chan, and the effort of Hanekawa—to create a situation that didn’t seem unnatural.

“What do you think is the hardest thing to find?”

After a short time—

The various things related to the snake god had ended, and a different set of things had begun, around that time—Hanekawa asked me something like that.

Well, when asked that so suddenly, I couldn’t immediately understand what Hanekawa was trying to get at.

“Eh? What are you talking about?”

“That is, about Ononoki-chan—Araragi-kun, you ended up living together with Ononoki-chan, right? So I figured I should tell you about it. What do you think is the hardest thing to find?”

“The hardest thing to find…”

What was it?

Speaking of which, some time ago, Shinobu had played a game where she hid donuts in my room—um, was I supposed to answer based on that?“

"Um, what I can think of is…”

“No, that question is just a preface, so it doesn’t really matter what you think or what you answer.”

“It doesn’t matter? Huh? Then what do you plan on asking after this preface?”

“That would be 'what do you think is the easiest thing to find?’”

“…In that case, I guess, it’s 'something you can tell with a single glance’…”

But what was something that you could tell with a single glance? Thinking about it, for most items, you could 'tell with a single glance’ what it was when you found it.

And it’s not like I could answer with 'a smile’…

“No, no, Araragi-kun. Don’t get tied up by those words so much. Because, that was a lie.”

“A lie?”

“Well, it might be exaggerating to call it a lie. Ononoki-chan wasn’t searching for anything. The hardest thing to find would be, well, something like that, I suppose—*you won’t be able to find something that doesn’t exist*.”

“……”

Eh?

Hold on, I understood that much… But why had I been lied to like that?

“Are you saying that Ononoki-chan came up with such an innocent lie because she wanted to play with me…?”

“That’s not it.”

I was quickly denied.

It was a little too quick.

“The answer is, 'what’s the easiest thing to find'—of course, something that’s easy to find is something that stands out, so if you ask what stands out—there’s nothing that stands out more than *someone who’s searching for something*.

Said Hanekawa.

"You’d stop walking, look around, crouch over, or stand on your tiptoes—it would definitely be suspicious behavior. Of course, it’s not as extreme an action as shouting in a weird voice—however, searching from a high place while standing on the finger of a doll-like girl would stand out a lot.”

“……”

Standing out—or rather.

Being extremely conspicuous—that’s what it was.

“Basically, Ononoki-chan’s intentions were to make Araragi-kun stand out. So that’s why she was hoisting you up like a flag.”

“Ha… A flag, huh?”

Rather than raising a flag, it seemed that I had been the one raised as a flag.

Were there any other guys in the world that were like this?

“B-but, why did Ononoki-chan want to make me stand out? Was she pointing me out, saying that this guy is an idiot that failed at the Center Test?”

“That could be the case.”

Could it be the case?

Deny it quickly like last time!

Especially for this.

“However, it wasn’t just that—you know about it already, right, Araragi-kun? Last month, in this town, there was someone that it would have been bad if you ran into them, right?”

“……”

“*It would’ve been bad if you ran into them*—and *that person didn’t want to run into you either*.”

Well, though we had eventually run into each other in the end.

Hanekawa continued.

“If he had been visiting this town on a daily basis, then, well, it wouldn’t have been strange if you two ended up crossing paths at some point—so most likely, in locations where that was the most likely, Ononoki-chan was there to stop you. By making you stand out, Araragi-kun, it made it easier for the other side to protect themselves.”

“*By making me look for something that couldn’t be found*—I was made to be easy to find…”

So that.

So that that con man and I—didn’t encounter each other.

“……”

“Of course, I’m not completely certain that he actually saw you when you were standing out, but if he did, he would certainly have avoided encountering you. For Yotsugi-chan, she didn’t want to make you any more worried than you were at that time, most likely—so the fact that nothing was happening, and there were no situations that could turn into incidents or stories, was due to you being held up by somebody’s consideration for you.

Ononoki Yotsugi’s consideration.

Consideration that I never noticed.

"To think that while I was being supported by someone in my peaceful life, I was saying I had to do something about it—it’s kind of funny now. I may as well be ridiculed by her.”

“Maybe. It’s often said that people can only be helped by themselves—but in actuality, it’s impossible for people to live on their own.”

Said Hanekawa, referring back to Oshino’s favorite line. It could be an opinion based on her location scouting, that is, the many overseas experiences she’s had.

“People can’t live on their own, and even if they wanted to—they’ll probably end up being taken care of by someone else. Food, or transportation, or even a change of clothes—maybe even sleep could be owed to someone else.”

“Well… That may be true. Although normally, you’d live your life without any consciousness of that.”

“That’s right. It’s possible that that nonchalant consideration is what’s the hardest thing to find.”

Hanekawa wrapped it up with those words.

If Ononoki-chan had said it in her monotone, it might have sounded like an unpleasant way to wrap it up, but when Hanekawa said it, it was amazing that I didn’t find it unpleasant at all—no.

Even if Ononoki-chan had said it, it was possible I still wouldn’t find it unpleasant.

That was what I felt.



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
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2

February

Koyomi Nothing

001

When we come to Kagenui Yozuru, then not as a simile or metaphor and not speaking figuratively, but she literally could not walk on roads—she was living her days under the restriction that she could not walk on the ground.

If you hear just that, it sounds like some elementary school game.

You'd imagine the ground as lava, and stand on stairs or blocks or something else, and only move by walking in high places—in other words, it was like her life was a solo game of 'the floor is lava'. When I first encountered her, she had been standing on top of a mailbox.

Well, for elementary schoolers it's just a game, but for an adult it was quite an eccentricity—and morever, the game is only possible because of how light elementary schoolers are, but for a fully grown adult, it's a little harder. There's no need to speak of how high her physical capabilities are now, but it was likely that they were the results of training due to her habitual eccentricities.

But no matter how I tried to gloss it over, eccentricities were eccentricities—it was a little too eccentric, and it was too hard to touch upon it, so I've never been able to directly ask about the reason.

However, from what I could grasp from our conversations, and from what I could hear from a certain origami lover, it seemed there was an actual reason for it—or rather, it wasn't simply just to train her body, and it wasn't like she was playing a game. Of course, even if there was a reason, without enough discipline, she would never have been able to go through with the behavior.

As her enemy, or rather.

As someone who had had the experience of fighting her directly—or rather than fighting her, as someone who had been sorely beaten up by her, well, there was probably no person that was scarier than she was.

Including Oshino, there have been many specialists that I've come into contact with, but Kagenui Yozuru was the scariest.

She was terrifying.

Even scarier than an oddity.

Even stronger than an oni.

An onmyouji that exterminated oddities with force was probably rarer than oddities themselves—but it was because of that that her behavioral principle was straightforward and easy to understand, and yet at the same time irregular.

Her random nature of not being able to walk on paths could be considered the symbol of her irregularity.

Incidentally, she had said that the reason for her specializing in immortal oddities was 'because then there's no way for me to go overkill', but I wonder if that's the real reason. Although it was fine if I took that statement at face value.

Compared to Oshino and Kaiki, her methodology was more easily understood, but she didn't really fit in with this society in an antisocial way—someday, I wanted to ask her, who lived her life in a darkness worse than oddities, despite being human.

I wanted to ask her, who didn't walk on paths.

I wanted to ask what paths were to her.

But I'm sure the answer would be something like this.

"If it's where I walk on, then you can pretty much call 'em paths."

002

"Hah!"

"Gyah!"

"Hah! Hah!"

"Gyah! Gyah!"

The shouts and screams may have sounded a bit cute, so the scene depicted may come across as two people playing around and getting along, but in actuality, the picture was of Kagenui-san beating me up, to put it mildly—and finally,

"Hah!"

With one last kick from Kagenui-san, as if she was aiming to gouge my side—almost as if to make you think where the middle portion of a daruma-otoshi was sent flying to—I collapsed in a heap, and our exchange ended.

"What, that's pretty pathetic—you at least had a little more backbone in ya when we fought over the summer."

Although I broke all your bones then—as she said that, she sprung up and landed on a stone lantern.

To land on a stone lantern at a sacred shrine would be grounds for divine punishment, but considering the shrine's god was absent, it was probably all right—it wasn't as if Kagenui-san could land on the ground, either, so even if the god was present, she would probably still be forgiven.

With me having collapsed face up directly in the middle of the shrine road, it wasn't like I could exactly criticize Kagenui-san, either.

"Ugh…"

I groaned.

I felt like my entire body was covered in bruises.

“No way… I thought we set the restriction that battling was banned…”

“There was no such restriction. The only restriction we had was no meta-jokes.”

“Is that so… What a terrible misunderstanding…”

“Or rather, aren’t you the one who challenged me to a battle?”

“That is correct…”

It was true.

What a terrible absurdity.

If all you heard was that, then you might think that I had some suicidal aspirations or something, but I really had, of my own free will, asked to spar with Kagenui-san—well, rather than sparring.

I wanted to ask what school of martial arts she was in.

And I had ended up with these miserable results—

“But even this was holdin’ back on ya, y'know? Nice and easy.”

“Yes, I can feel that…”

Though I wished you had held back even more… Even nicer and easier. Like a sponge filled with holes.“

"I’m keenly aware of it…”

“By the way, what did ya want? Challengin’ me to a battle all of a sudden.”

“……”

I had thought that it was because she knew about the circumstances that she took on my reckless challenge without hearing the details… But it seemed that she had been fine with beating me up without any reason.

She was pretty amazing.

She really was capable.

As she was one of Oshino’s classmates, I had unconsciously expected her to ‘see through’ me as well—but she was of a completely different type from Oshino, or even Kaiki.

She was easy to understand, in a good way.

Perhaps she was even easy to understand in a bad way.

Although, you could also say she had some points in common with things not dealt with by ordinary means…

“Ha…”

February.

On a day in late February, I had visited the North White Snake Shrine—at this shrine in which the god had once again become absent, I had come close to death many times over, and even more recently, there had been an actual death that occurred, so it wasn’t

a place I wanted to visit with rash feelings—but today, I had some business with a specialist.

Kagenui-san, the violent onmyouji Kagenui Yozuru-san, had come to take up residence here, so it couldn't be helped.

Right, like how Oshino Meme spent his nights at the ruins of an old cram school that no longer existed now when he was staying at this town, as Kagenui Yozuru was currently staying at this town, she was spending her nights at the North White Snake Shrine—she really had a strong heart that made you gape in disbelief.

As a specialist, she would be the first to know what kind of a place this was—I had wondered if she had been ordered to stay here by that person, the boss of the specialists, but after hearing her story, it seemed that wasn't the case.

Or rather, though it sounded obvious and was a story that would make you think of course that would be the case, Kagenui-san and that person didn't seem to get along very well—staying at this shrine wasn't exactly a revolt against that person, but it seemed to insinuate it.

Well—since there was that case with Tadatsuru-san.

Although it was a little too reckless for an insinuation—perhaps Kagenui-san herself was aware of that as well, as she had taken the precautionary measures of putting her shikigami oddity Ononoki Yotsugi in the custody of my home without even asking for my approval.

Putting a little girl in the custody of my home…

Was that really a precautionary measure!?

"……"

Well, putting that aside.

As a summary of my current state, if I wanted to quickly put together the current situation, then during spring break of last year, my blood had been drunk by a legendary vampire, and, having been turned into a vampire as a result, I had somehow or other managed to turn back into a human, but with traces of vampirism still remaining—and though it was hardly an inconvenience to live normally as a human from then on, I had foolishly relied on that vampirism to deal with the many hardships that had occurred afterwards.

I don't think I was wrong in doing so.

If I hadn't done so, they would be hardships I would not have been able to overcome—or rather, the previous case of the snake god could certainly not have been overcome if I had not relied on my vampirism.

There was no choice.

Even if I knew that.

Well, I was paying the consequences for it now.

Compensation for using the power of oddities—the power of the dark.

As someone who kept touching the dark, who kept stepping into the dark, it was natural that my body would end up being dyed by the darkness—it was only natural.

To put it briefly, my vampirification had gotten obvious—but it was not intentional vampirification, and not to mention irreversible.

At present, I simply couldn't be reflected in mirrors or show up in photographs—yes, right now it was only a small inconvenience, but from now on, if I had to rely on my vampire powers again, then I might end up turning into ash from sunlight, or become unable to eat garlic, or even melt in holy water.

In exchange for that, I would be able to obtain absolute and tremendous power—but I would have no chance of having a normal life in human society.

In other words, whatever I had to deal with next, I couldn't rely on my vampirism anymore—that was the case.

"...So with that, since that's come to an end now, I thought I'd ask you if I could get some training from you, Kagenui-san. If another hardship approaches, I'd like to be able to brilliantly deal with it without relying on my vampire powers, like you do, Kagenui-san—"

"Ah—"

She clapped her hands together.

Still while squatting on top of the stone lantern.

"I see, so it's like that. But it's better if you quit now."

"Is that so?"

Was it better if I quit now?

She had told me to get lost, but I wanted to know for what reason.

"Well, first of all, it's not like the way I do things can be mastered in a single day, and another thing is that I'm pretty unorthodox among the specialists. It's not something I should be teachin' to a youth like you."

"....."

Even if Kagenui-san certainly wasn't in her teens, I'd still say that in terms of her industry, she was still a youth as well.

Also, the reason I wanted to study Kagenui-san's methodology was because it seemed that she had an extremely simple and easy to learn negotiations technique that mainly involved 'suppressing oddities with violence'—but, it was possible that it was because it was so simple that, conversely, you couldn't master it in a single day.

The simplest things were the most difficult.

Even studying was like that.

"And if I wanted to say another thing, then if you wanted to learn my ways via practice battles like this,"

said Kagenui-san,

“Then you’d die before you learned a thing.”

“……”

Those reasons were plenty to explain why Kagenui-san wasn’t going to teach me.

Her tuition fee was too high.

In the first place, I could barely lay a hand on her even in full vampire mode, so it’s not like I could amount to her as normal flesh and blood—as I thought that, I had finally regained my breath, and picked myself up from my lying down state.

Even if the shrine didn’t have a god, lying down on the shrine grounds didn’t make me feel at ease.

“More importantly, you’re not in the situation to be doin’ that sort of thing, are ya? The final exam for your entrance exams is comin’ up soon, right—isn’t it about time for you to be takin’ backup exams for private universities?”

“Unfortunately, my parents aren’t really expecting much from me. The only exam I’m taking is the one for my top choice school.”

“Hmm… In a sense, that’s some courage you got there. What was it like for me when I was takin’ exams—I can hardly remember now. I feel like I was in college before I knew it.”

“I don’t think that could be the case…”

“And before I knew it, it was graduation, and before I knew it, I was working like this—I was just going around hitting anything that made me mad then.”

“……”

If that was really the case, then she must be a prodigy.

Would the things that made her mad be oddities, then… Or did it include other humans, too?

Hmm.

Though I had come to ask her to teach me, it still seemed that she was the type of person that was hard to get along with.

“Well, it isn’t good if I push myself too hard. Since I’ve come this far, after this, whatever happens is whatever happens.”

“That’s a line that I sense a kind of resignation from. Well, since your remaining life has just been extended by a lot, it sounds like something a wanderer would say.”

“No, I’d like to avoid becoming a wanderer, though. For various reasons.”

“Then all the more reason for you to not be in fistfights with me at an empty shrine like this.”

Kagenui-san said—what we had just done wasn’t exactly a fistfight but me being one-sidedly attacked, but anyway, it sounded like something a proper adult would say.

“Why d'you think Yotsugi and I infiltrated your house, anyway? At the very least, for a little while, you shouldn’t expect to be bothered by any oddities now.”

“Well, I understand that now… But I feel a little sorry to live my life being protected by little girls.”

“Would the other little girl be the former Kissshot? That’s a six-hundred-year-old oddity ya got there—and even if you call her a little girl, Yotsugi’s the tsukumogami of a corpse doll.”

“If you say it like that, I’m living my life being protected by some incredible people…”

The one who said that you’re always protected in your everyday life when nothing occurs was Hanekawa, wasn’t it.

“That’s why—don’t try to carelessly stick your neck in where it doesn’t belong. And that goes for you over there.”

“Over there?”

“By over there, I mean whoever it is anywhere—but whatever. In any case, it’s better if you stop tryin’ to do impossible things like learnin’ something from me. Well, there’s been plenty of people like you that tried to do the same thing, and I tried actin’ like the master of my art on a whim, but it’s never ended well.”

Kagenui-san said while cackling—well, trying to imagine that 'it never ended well’ in a more concrete way, it didn’t seem that the students that Kagenui-san took on on a whim ended up coming out of it unhurt…

Hm.

Though I had thought it was a good idea, I guess it was a bit too simplistic—or rather, this could be a lesson on not to act on every idea. But if you speak of lessons, then I can’t help but think of that con man…

“Kagenui-san.”

By now, I had already abandoned my selfish idea of being taught by Kagenui-san, but I asked out of sheer curiosity.

“How did you get involved in this world?”

“Mm? This world?”

“Er, that is, the world of oddities, or oddity stories, or stuff like that…”

“In all honesty, it doesn’t really make a difference to me—all I’m doin’ is takin’ care of things that bother me.”

She had something along those lines earlier, too.

Though I had thought this over summer break, it seemed that she operated on surprisingly simple principles.

A confrontation strategy of justice and evil.

Well, instead of justice—would it be the innate goodness within humanity?

In the first place, someone like Oshinon would say that in this world, there existed justice that was unpleasant or goodness that you would disagree with—in the same way, the evil you come to expect could be considered a necessary evil as well.

In this world that couldn't be dealt with by ordinary means, Kagenui-san could be said to be living via ordinary means…

"The first time'd be when I hit some guy that was making me mad in kindergarten—thinking about it now, that guy might have been possessed by something, too. Well, that's from around the time I decided to specialize in immortal oddities."

"Well, if you decided to specialize in immortal oddities when you were a kindergartener, then that would make me very surprised…"

Kagenui-san at the age of a kindergartener.

It was nearly unimaginable—but even if I had her at that age as my opponent, I didn't think I'd be able to beat her in a battle.

I'll pray for the well-being of the guy that was hit by the kindergartener Kagenui-chan.

"So, the reason you have immortal oddities as your specialty is that there's no way for you to go overkill—right? Looking at it another way, that would mean there were quite a few times that you actually did go overkill. Did you base your work on that?"

"Well, I suppose it's something like that—you sure have a lot of questions. Don't tell me you're trying to add me into the mix, are ya? To the rumored Araragi harem."

"……"

How did she know about that?

The existence of the Araragi harem—although it wasn't like such an organization in bad taste actually existed. It must be gossip from Ononoki-chan.

It must be leaking out.

Since we had ended up living together, information could be leaking out even more—although that could be considered convenient, in a way.

If the truth that Tsukihi was living life without causing any problems was circulated to Kagenui-san, then it would in no way be a minus for me.

"That makes it sound like I've become a great enough person to make a pass at you—but rather than being great, I'm at the point where I can barely be considered a person."

"No need to worry 'bout that, since I'll just beat ya up if it ever gets to that. That's another reason why I had Yotsugi cling to ya, too. I told her, if he ever starts straying from the path of humanity, then take care of it without mercy."

"……"

The path of humanity, huh.

I had been trying to properly walk down the path of humanity, so how exactly had it come to this, anyway?

And for Ononoki-chan to be an assassin…

The truth had suddenly become clear.

Well, I could understand it after giving it some thought, but I had never considered it until I was told just now. I had found myself forgetting since she looked like a cute doll, but Ononoki-chan was also a professional that specialized in 'immortal oddities'.

Ha—Kagenui-san laughed.

Even if I tell you that, she said.

"I don't think there's any need to think so negatively, though—you can still live a normal life without any problems."

"…Even if I can't be seen in a mirror?"

"You aren't gonna die even if you can't be seen in a mirror. It'd be a huge problem if you turned into ash in sunlight, though—since we wouldn't know what the cause would be, it'd be pretty frightenin', and you'd be in excruciatin' pain, but at least in this case we know exactly what's causin' it. It can only be because you using your vampirism too much."

"Well, I understand that much—but after all this, I don't think I can just live my life as if nothing had happened. I mean, if this much happened in a single year just from having known about oddities—"

"Well, you have a pretty high frequency. Of running into trouble."

"……"

One of the high-frequency troubles that I had run into involved you and Ononoki-chan, was what I wanted to say. Though she wasn't necessarily my ally now, we had still managed to form enough of a relationship to converse like this.

And to get advice from her—though that wasn't necessarily the case.

"But d'you think there's anyone who's able to live without runnin' into any trouble their whole life? Although I guess the majority of people aren't vampires—but then you can rely on outsiders like me to do something. I'll do this or that or something or other. To be specific, just by recognizin' the existence of oddities and stuff, people like you and I have their minds grow weak."

"Our minds—grow weak?"

"Since we realize that there's existence of the unknown, or that we'll never know if something might happen. Since our everyday anxieties increase by that much, it's harder to concentrate on the normal aspects. I thought Oshino-kun was bothered by the same problem."

"Oshino was…?"

Though I wouldn't say Oshino had the image of being bothered by things.

His image always seemed extremely easygoing, and I had never once seem him lost in deep thought.

Well, even so.

It's not as if I had ever had that image myself—it was possible that because of his attitude of wanting to maintain the balance to the point of almost being neurotic, he feared the collapse of that balance and the loss of neutrality.

Abnormally.

Feared it.

"In that case, Kaiki seemed really easygoing… Since he couldn't care less about the balance of the natural world, and did whatever he wanted to, that guy."

"Well, Kaiki-kun does take the stance of not believin' in the existence of oddities—although, he could just be protectin' himself by takin' that stance. Oshino-kun is much the same for taking a stance of keeping things balanced."

Much the same, huh.

Well, a long time ago, they were apparently friends—not to mention, it would be rare to meet a man that fit the word 'easygoing' as little as Kaiki did.

Easygoing was close to being the antonym of sinister, after all.

"But for me and you, it's a little impossible to take a stance like that, ain't it. Regardless of it's the stance of balancing or the stance of denial."

"Impossible… What do you mean?

"Since you yourself are an oddity—and I have Yotsugi to look after, too."

Although, I guess since you're in the same situation as me, in the sense that you have the former Kissshot to look after—said Kagenui-san.

"Even if we wanted to keep the balance, we're far too close to oddities to do so—because we're based in oddities so much. And if you wanted to deny them, then you would essentially be denyin' a part of yourself."

"……"

When she said something like that, it kind of perplexed me.

To say that Kagenui-san, who acted boldly with plenty of confidence and worked without pretense despite her eccentricity of not walking on paths and living in a logical way based on her beliefs, and I, who aimlessly wandered around for every little thing like a kite with a cut string blowing in the wind, had something in common—no, it was possible that I had unconsciously felt the same thing, and it was for that reason that I had come all this way to the North White Snake Shrine to ask to be taught like this.

…Maybe.

If I barraged Kagenui-san with questions, she might end up suspecting that I really was trying to invite her into the Araragi harem—even though such a thing didn't exist!—but even so, if I had only one thing I wanted to ask Kagenui-san, then it would be about that.

Not about how she fought against oddities—not about how she got involved in this world—not about the previous times she 'went overkill', and of course, not about how she learned about the existence of an Araragi harem.

What I wanted to ask.

What I wanted to ask Kagenui Yozuru was.

“Hey, Kagenui-san.”

“What is it?”

“What relationship do you have with Ononoki-chan?”

003

The specialist Kagenui Yozuru.

The shikigami oddity Ononoki Yotsugi.

Even without having to confirm their relationship again now, I knew it was that of an onmyouji and her shikigami—that is, the relationship between master and servant, or a hierarchical relationship, or a relationship where Ononoki-chan was Kagenui-san’s property, or her weapon used to fight oddities, or perhaps even a means of transportation.

To add another bit of information on top of that, the corpse doll used as the model for the tsukumogami that Ononoki-chan was some sort of work produced together by the occult research society that represented the four people of Kagenui-san, Oshino, Kaiki, and Teori Tadatsuru—Kagenui-san had taken charge of that, and gotten to this point now.

I knew that much.

But conversely, I only knew that little—I had no idea why, after that up until now, Kagenui-san and Ononoki-chan had begun to work together in their actions.

After all, if you thought about it, wasn’t it a contradiction?—for Kagenui-san, who spent every day, or perhaps you could say every night, fighting with immortal oddities as her specialty and her way of life—to use as a tool or as a vehicle an oddity that had no life, couldn’t die even if she was broken into pieces, or in other words, immortal.

It was almost as if—like me, who was living together with a vampire, an unforgivable enemy, whose existence was sealed, she was filled with contradictions.

In the exact same way, we were filled with the exact same contradictions.

Some time ago, I had heard that Kagenui-san was making use of Ononoki-chan to make sure she didn’t get too involved in the world of darkness—but making use of the dark to avoid touching the darkness was, in itself, a contradiction.

I had imagined a lot of things in regards to this, but I wasn’t able to arrive at a conclusion—that’s why I wanted to ask Kagenui-san directly.

Whatever the response was.

Because I figured I could use it as a reference for my and Shinobu's relationship—the fact that I was drawing in closer to becoming a vampire obviously meant that Shinobu was being influenced as well.

Though I couldn't judge whether that influence was good or bad for now—however, even if it was a good influence, that still made me want to hear Kagenui-san out.

A specialist that carried out her life alongside an oddity.

Because that might have been my ideal—although, it wasn't like I had some dream of becoming a half-human half-oddity specialist or anything.

"The relationship between me and Yotsugi?"

Since I was asking about her relationship with seomeone else, it could've been rather intrusive, but while Kagenui-san had an unexpected expression on her face, it didn't look like I had hurt her mood—well, if I really had hurt her mood, then she would probably have hurt my body in return, so it seemed I was risking my life for the question.

And when I say an unexpected expression, it was the kind of unexpected where she was saying, 'you're only asking about that now?'—like, 'haven't I already talked about this,' or, 'haven't you already heard about it already', or something like that.

"Well, I'm pretty sure you already know, but it's master and s… It's onmyouji and shikigami."

"Weren't you just about to say slave?"

"I was gonna say song."

"Master and song?"

It sounded like the title of some hopeless music-related maid anime…

"Well, of course I know about you guys being onmyouji and shikigami… But, you know, Ononoki-chan calls you 'onee-chan', doesn't she?"

"She does."

"So I was wondering if you had some kind of sisterly relationship."

"If you say that, then Yotsugi calls ya onii-chan too, doesn't she? She just calles people onii-chan and onee-chan in general."

She calls Oshino-kun Oshino-onii-chan, and Kaiki-kun Kaiki-onii-chan, too—she said.

"Though she just says Gaen-san when talking to Gaen-san. But she's an exception."

"Uh-huh—but…"

She even called Kaiki that?

I guess she knows no fear…

“Kagenui-san, doesn’t she just call you onee-chan? In my case, she calls me the oni onii-chan, or oni-i-chan for short.”

It was a nickname that had weirdly established itself.

“But she just calls you onee-chan.”

“…Hm.”

Taking my question with a basis that could hardly be called a basis, Kagenui-san—stayed profoundly silent. Well, I thought she stayed silent. That’s what I thought, and though she did in fact stay silent, she took action at the same time—as she stayed silent, she leaped off the stone lantern.

It was an action that required no preparation, to the point where I wondered if there had been an afterimage—rather than leaping, it almost looked like she disappeared.

And naturally.

The place she leapt to with great speed was on top of my head—like she had been crouching on the stone lantern up until now, she was now crouching on the crown of my head.

“…Um, Kagenui-san.”

Before, when her head was landed on by Kagenui-san, Shinobu had felt down, and now I could understand that to have someone sit on your head wasn’t just your average humiliation but a flavorful sense of defeat…

I feel like I, Araragi, had awoken to a new part of myself.

In the first place, she had canceled out her weight like she had before, so it wasn’t that she was heavy… Though it wasn’t Shinobu, manipulating your weight was normally the work of an oddity.

Ononoki-chan had taken care of it with a single word, though…

“That’s a pretty good reading you have—or should I say good perception? Do you get perfect scores for multiple-choice questions on your exams?”

“I hear that a lot, but no.”

“Hmm. Well, always missin’ a multiple-choice question is also pretty impressive in terms of probability.”

“That kind of impressiveness isn’t what I need in my life, though.”

“So, what do you think?”

“If you ask what I think… Let’s see. I can’t help but expect a past where the doll you used as a model for you, Oshino, Kaiki, and Teori Tadatsuru to create Yotsugi-chan was actually the body of your real sister.”

“What kinda heavy past do you want to burden people’s lives with!?”

She stepped on my head.

Ouch.

Well, though it did hurt, it was in the end a cruel expectation, or rather, a cruel prediction, that made me think that she could have done even worse.

“Well, you don’t really resemble each other to look like actual sisters—although since Ononoki-chan doesn’t have any expressions, it’s hard to tell. Since a large part of judging when people look alike is by the way they make their expressions rather than the physical features of their face—”

“Ha. If you have to make that kind of reasoning, then I can see how far your perception goes. At this rate, you’ll definitely fail your entrance exams.”

“Um, it’s not like this will show up on the entrance exams. Ononoki-chan’s origins or whatever.”

“Hm. Well, I don’t have any reason to hide it, and it might be fine if I told you—”

Kagenui-san looked as if she was meditating on top of my head—probably. I couldn’t actually what was going on on top of my head.

“—but y'know. When I get asked this in such a formal way, it makes me feel important. Well, it makes me not want to tell ya.”

“……”

Eh.

I had stepped into this line of conversation (though I was the one being stepped on) because I had thought Kagenui-san was a refreshingly straightforward person who wouldn’t demand money for asking questions like Kaiki did, but an unforeseen contrary side of her had appeared.

I guess that made sense…

There was no way that a refreshingly straightforward person could have been birds of a feather with Oshino and Kaiki—not wanting to answer something that was asked to you formally was a personality that was easy to understand, though not something that was easy to associate with.

I should’ve asked more casually.

I could’ve mixed it in with my barrage of other questions—she would easily have consented without wondering about the reason had I just asked.

“So, am I not going to be told about it?”

“Hold on, I never said I wouldn’t tell ya. And you don’t need to worry, since I’m not going to ask for work or money as payment like Oshino-kun or Kaiki-kun. Let’s see—how’s about we continue our battle?”

“Eh?”

Continue our battle?

I thought the battle development was already over.

“Um, is it something like, I get to hear about Ononoki-chan’s origins if I’m able to beat you? Now hold on a minute, that’s practically impossible, and almost unreasonable…”

I would almost prefer having to pay Oshino fifty million yen, or get ripped off by Kaiki for small change—with my experiences over summer break, and the experience of today's duel, I was certain that I wouldn't be able to beat this person in a hundred million years.

A hundred million years.

Not even a vampire could live that long.

Honestly, though I was very interested in the origins of Ononoki-chan, who had come to live with me, I wasn't interested enough to throw away the life that I had finally managed to reclaim.

"Well, of course I won't ask you to try and beat me. I wouldn't require you to do something that nobody's ever been able to do before."

"……"

Eh?

She's never been defeated before?

Shinobu and I challenged a person like that and was let go?

…After so long, I was finally made aware of how dangerous the road I had walked was.

"One hit is fine."

Said the undefeated specialist.

As ever, on top of my head.

"If you can fight me—and get even one hit on me, then I'll tell ya about what Yotsugi really is."

004

"And so for that reason, Karen-chan, it's your turn to shine!"

"Er, even if you say for that reason… For what reason, exactly?"

I thought I'd be able to persuade her with force, but the magic words of 'for that reason' weren't able to get through to Karen—it was after I had returned home.

I had called Karen to my room and had suddenly attacked with the main question. At the moment, the other sister, Tsukihi, was playing in the next room with Ononoki-chan.

To Tsukihi, Ononoki-chan was simply a 'stuffed doll', so it wasn't really 'with' her but 'using' her, but regardless, in terms of their relationship, their affinity made them a dangerous combination.

Before I took it to Karen, I had thought that I could always ask Ononoki-chan herself about it, but asking the property about something that the owner wouldn't tell me about felt like foul play.

It was possible that the principle of don't do things as you think of them applied here—namely, questions should be asked to the people that should be asked them.

Well, in her own way, (the current character of) Ononoki-chan was pretty rebellious, so I didn't think she would obediently tell me, anyway…

Not to mention, as she said 'my life began as soon as onee-chan restored me to life', it was another thing whether or not she actually knew the truth.

"Anyway, Karen-chan. I have reasons why I can't tell you the specific details, but there's a person that's as strong as an oni, and it feels like I can't lay a finger on them, but I want to get at least one punch in. Is there a good way?"

"What does this brother of mine think I am…?"

Karen had a dubious expression—or, rather than dubious, it could be regretful.

"I'm a martial artist that walks down the road of martial arts. Even if I knew the way to cause violence, I wouldn't teach it on an amateur like you, nii-chan. Especially not for such a vague reason!"

"Don't say that. I'll rub your boobs for you whenever you want!"

"Hm? Is that so? Well, well, if that's the case, I'm prepared to come to a compromise… not! There's never gonna be a time when I want you to rub my boobs!"

She was enraged.

She was really quick-tempered, wasn't she.

I was ashamed of her as her brother.

"Wait, think about it, Karen-chan. Which is better, having your boobs rubbed whenever you wanted it, or having your boobs rubbed whenever you didn't want it?"

"Hm? Ah, in that case it would definitely be whenever I wanted it! When you compare it like that, it's so obvious! You're pretty smart, aren'tcha, nii-chan!"

"……"

You're pretty dumb, aren'tcha, Karen-chan.

I was concerned for her as her brother.

"All right I got it. I don't take on disciples on principle, but I'll give you special treatment just for you, nii-chan. Hm? My brother as my disciple? That makes it really confusing whether you're older or younger than me!"

"I'm older, of course. And it's not like you have to take me on as a disciple… Just for example, what would you do? If there's someone that's clearly stronger than you, but you still wanted to get a punch in, what would you do?"

"It's impossible!"

She responded cheerfully.

Why in the world was she so cheerful about that?

“I’m being serious here. You’re asking for my opinion without really giving me any details, but under those conditions, it’s going to be really hard to punch someone like that, you know? Even if it’s not a clean hit, even if you just get in through their defenses, it’s still hard, you know?”

“You’re right. I said that I couldn’t lay a finger on them.”

“If the difference in your power is that big, it’s better if you didn’t fight them. In martial arts, the right answer is to run away from an opponent like that.”

“……”

Karen was saying something that was almost believable.

However, how many times had I witnessed her recklessly facing an opponent that she had no chance of beating?—every time, I felt like I was frantically trying to hold her back. And that wasn’t just figurative, because I was frantic in that I was sure she would 'definitely die’.[33]

They say to correct your faults by looking at others’ faults, but truly, people tell others to do things that they themselves can’t do, huh.

“In the first place, even if you managed to get that punch in, what would you do after that? Even if you got a lucky punch in an opponent who was obviously more powerful than you, it’s not like they’d suddenly be defeated. They’d counterattack, and you’d totally be beaten up!”

“Hm… Well, you have a point.”

For example, if I managed to get in a hit on Kagenui-san by chance, she wasn’t the type that would go, 'Good job!’ and pat me on the shoulder. If anything, she’d say, 'What’re you letting down your guard for!’ and break my shoulders instead.

The image I had of Kagenui-san was pretty general… But I got the feeling that the risk to obtain the information I wanted was too high. It wasn’t as if Kagenui-san would definitely keep her promise, so trying to get a single hit on her…

I felt like the wise thing to do would be to not go along with Kagenui-san’s request that was, in the end, just playing around, and instead ask, 'please tell me without having to do something like that’ while rubbing my hands together and bowing. Well, that wasn’t necessarily wise, but…

Hm.

“Karen-chan. What would you do if it were you? If there was an opponent that you absolutely had to hit once.”

“Someone like you, nii-chan?”

“No, no, I’m someone that’s on the other end of the spectrum. If there was someone with power you couldn’t live up to, what would you do?”

“I told you. There’s nothing I could do. At best, I’d have to look at the long term. In order to beat someone like that, I’d start training.”

---

[33] 'definitely die' and 'frantic' use the same kanji. （必ず死ぬ｜必死）

“Training…”

Rather than looking at the long term, it was more about being patient…

I didn’t want to know about Ononoki-chan’s past to the point that I’d start training in martial arts—although, the reason I had gone to Kagenui-san in the first place was to gain physical strength to fight, so overall it was pretty consistent…

“If you’re getting a single hit in, then it’ll just turn into a battle, so you’ll have no choice but to fight to win. Although it’s a different story if it’s a one-hit knockout—but if you had enough power to do a one-hit knockout, then you probably wouldn’t have any trouble fighting them.”

“Well, thinking about it like that, martial arts is a technique used to become stronger than the opponent. Rather than it being a technique for weak people to win against strong people, it’s a technique to become stronger than those strong people—”

“My master says that you won’t get stronger while you consider martial arts a technique, but that’s an unavoidable reality. In the end, the mentality that martial arts seeks to obtain is the one that says 'great power comes with great responsibility’. That’s why I’m carrying out justice!”

“Then, if you see someone who isn’t carrying out justice, what would you do?”

“There’s no one like that. My justice is a water cutter!”

“So it’s water, huh…”

Weren’t you guys the Fire Sisters?

Recently, it seems you’ve been working separately.

To think that she’s almost a high schooler now, it’s pretty scary.

And with that, a flash of inspiration came to me.

It was true that, even if I learned the basics of karate from Karen here and took them to Kagenui-san, there was a lot of riskiness in that it was highly possible for me to not hear anything about Ononoki-chan or to just get beten up, but that was just the difference in our power—a gap, if you could call it that.

But she had never stated that the person who had to land a hit on her had to be me—in other words, there had to be a way for me to elect a representative.

For example, how would the water cutter in front of me do?—though it would be bad if I had Tsukihi and Kagenui-san meet, at the very least, Karen had run into Kagenui-san once before.

So, as a result.

“Hey, Karen-chan.”

“What is it, bro?”

“Do you feel like fighting in my place?”

“No.”

She didn't even think for a second.

"There's no way I would fight someone that you can't even land a hit on, nii-chan!"

"……"

Your confidence in your brother is so high it scares me.

"Rather than that, nii-chan. From what I can tell, basically, if you manage to land a hit on this person, then they're going to answer a question of yours, is that what's going on?"

"Yeah, that's right. Your guessing is pretty good."

"Isn't that just rejecting you nicely?"

"……"

"You probably asked something stupid, didn't you? Isn't that why she turned you away without raising any issues? Or you could say she sidestepped the problem… Aren't you worrying too much about trying to land a hit on them, nii-chan, instead of thinking about whether they'll actually answer the question or not?"

"What!…"

No words would come out.

You could almost say I had lost my words—the shock was such that I wasn't sure if I would ever speak again for the rest of my life.

It was such a loss of words that I wondered if the scene where I would regain them would be in some emotional climax—there were two reasons for the shock.

Well, the two reasons were pretty similar—but aside from the shock of having the problem be sidestepped, there were two other large reasons.

The first was from the embarrassment of having that be pointed out by Araragi Karen, who I had thought had not just her brain but her soul made up of only muscles, in other words, the shock of the shame was one—and the other was that sidestepping in such a nonchalant way that was almost considerate, almost like a magician, was done by none other than Kagenui-san.

Kagenui Yozuru, who I had thought was a walking storm that only resolved things with violence, would do something like that—that Kagenui-san, who was quite capable of doing damage on a greater scale than Shinobu, who I had once compared to a typhoon.

"……"

Well.

It was possible that because it was such a careful plan by someone like Kagenui-san that Karen was able to see through it—

"So that's it… So that's the adult behavior that Kagenui-san can pull off…"

It was different from Oshino or Kaiki.

By turning my impudent question into a game, she had neatly wrapped it up without making it awkward—no.

You could even say that my question was so 'intrusive' that it made her select such a wise 'adult behavior' insetad of immediately settling it with violence.

“Well, if that’s the case, what exactly should I do from here?”

I asked Karen.

As I had completely lost heart in my own carelessness, or rather, the way I did things just as I thought of them, I had come to completely rely on Karen.

Karen had become the little sister that I yearned for.

“As if I’d know. Think for yourself!”

“……”

The sister I yearned for was cold.

“But if it were me, then let’s see. For the person who gave me such a consideration, I’d try really hard so that they don’t lose face. At the very least, I’d try not to let on that I saw through the offer of battling as an excuse from the advice of my intelligent little sister.”

“I don’t know where this intelligent little sister is, but you’re right. It would be rude to point that out.”

It was something that I could see Kanbaru doing, though.

Pretending not to notice someone else’s casual consideration.

As I was now, I was capable of doing that—wait, was I capable of doing that?

“But if I pretend not to notice, then that means I’d have to keep facing her in battle… So I’d have to keep challenging her in meaningless battles that I know I can’t win and keep getting beaten up…”

“You don’t have a choice, do you? Just get beaten up!”

“Do you have no feelings towards protecting your older brother?”

“What I’m going to protect is not nii-chan, but determination!”

“Won’t you at least protect my determination to not want to be beaten up?”

Besides, putting aside my determination, I had to hide my intent to live up to Kagenui-san’s thoughts—if she was going to give that level of casual consideration, then I’d need some sort of excuse in regards to facing her.

It was too reckless to face her in battle while not aiming for any sort of success—she might get suspicious about if I was losing on purpose—but she wasn’t the kind of person that would fall for it if I tried to lose quickly and accelerate the battles.

Even if she did fall for it, it would only humiliate me in front of her.

“……”

What's with this incomprehensible situation…

Instead of trying to win against Kagenui-san—I had to find a way to get a hit in and lose skillfully.

I had to find a way to win, but I couldn't win in that way… Why was I the one who had to carry out such a secret maneuver?

It was like getting questions wrong on purpose so that the class average wouldn't be raised as a prank… If this was the compensation for not thinking twice about my actions, it was too large.

"My movements are limited, huh…"

"Your movement is at its limit? Wow, nii-chan, did you manage to master martial arts already?"

Karen said something that stupid.

To think someone this stupid was able to point out my insensibility…

005

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line.

As for how I managed to settle my own carelessness—how I managed to set up a false chance of victory.

Well, it wasn't that impressive of an idea.

My actions and thought patterns didn't have much variation to them—that's why, fundamentally, I followed the same methods I had taken against Kagenui-san once over summer break.

To explain to those who don't know, on that day in summer break, I had had my blood sucked by the mere shadow of the legendary vampire, Oshino Shinobu, in order to challenge Kagenui-san… By having my blood sucked, our vampiric nature was increased, powering me up (as well as Shinobu).

Well.

No matter how much I increased my vampire skills, I still couldn't lay a finger to a frightening extent on Kagenui-san, who specialized in immortal oddities—however, even so, that was the best way to do it.

The best way, while at the same time, the worst way.

That's why, if I were under unrestricted circumstances, I would simply have had Shinobu suck more blood than last time, and that would be the way that was 'easy to think of', easy to come up with, in order to win at Kagenui-san's game with the 'best chances of winning'—however, at this point, I couldn't do anything close to that.

I couldn't turn into a vampire any more than this—even Kagenui-san knew that. So even if I pretended to do something like that and challenged her, I'd just end up being beaten up more than necessary.

Even before that, if I became any more of a vampire, then as a specialist—as a specialist against immortal oddities, she would undoubtedly pulverize my existence.

The fact that she let me go in summer break was truly a miracle—especially since she wasn't the kind of person that could be convinced by tears.

Since she's a pro.

So I wouldn't use the idea of turning into a vampire in order to lose—but the idea of borrowing Shinobu's power was still on the table.

I would borrow her power of matter materialization.

Shinobu had the unconventional ability of creating anything she imagined, any way she wanted, from the shadows and the darkness, all the while ignoring the law of conservation of energy or the law of conservation of mass—so this time, I had her create a pistol.

A revolver.

A gun.

Yahoo!

No matter how strong Kagenui-san was, I'd be able to win easily with a gun!

As if that was the case.

I wouldn't be able to beat someone like that with a bazooka, let alone a gun—vampires may die if shot with a silver bullet, but no matter what kind of a bullet it was, I doubt Kagenui-san would die from it, or even get shot by it.

So the reason I brought a gun was just for the sake of rhetoric—after all, Kagenui-san had just said one hit.

If I got one hit on her.

But she never said if that one hit could be a punch or a bullet!

Although, this seemed like just another one of my foolish, hasty, simplistic ideas—and, most importantly, it was one hundred percent going to fail.

There was a lot of persuasive power to an idea that would fail—when I pulled the trigger, there was no way the bullet would even graze Kagenui-san.

The foolish high schooler with a foolish sister challenged her to a game and lost—and the story would end there. An instant reply to that casual consideration… Well, in terms of cleaning up after my carelessness, I'd say it was a passing grade.

So the next day, I had the pistol in hand (as the gun was designed by Shinobu, it had the eccentric design of some kind of automatic revolver), and visited the North White Snake Shrine.

It was considerably dangerous, if I say so myself, to put a pistol in the hands of someone as reckless as myself, but let's put that aside—as for Kagenui Yozuru and Ononoki Yotsugi's relationship.

My desire to know about it hadn't changed, but… Well, it was something I could ask about after things were handled.

But my intuition, which wasn't always right, told me—that the way Kagenui-san lived her life without touching the ground wasn't unrelated to Ononoki-chan's existence.

The way I had to sacrifice many things to live together with Shinobu—but it wasn't something I had confirmed yet.

Even if I could hear about just that.

I'd be able to calm down just a little bit, and face my exams head on—or so I thought.

I had arrived at the North White Snake Shrine, but it seemed my intuition, which wasn't always right, had been wrong once again—but this time, it didn't have anything to do with the relationship between Kagenui-san and Ononoki-chan.

"Huh…?"

The shrine without a god.

An empty shrine where only the building had been reestablished—a perfect hangout spot for drifters.

On the grounds of that shrine, the strongest onee-san that I knew of—the undefeated specialist Kagenui Yozuru—had disappeared.

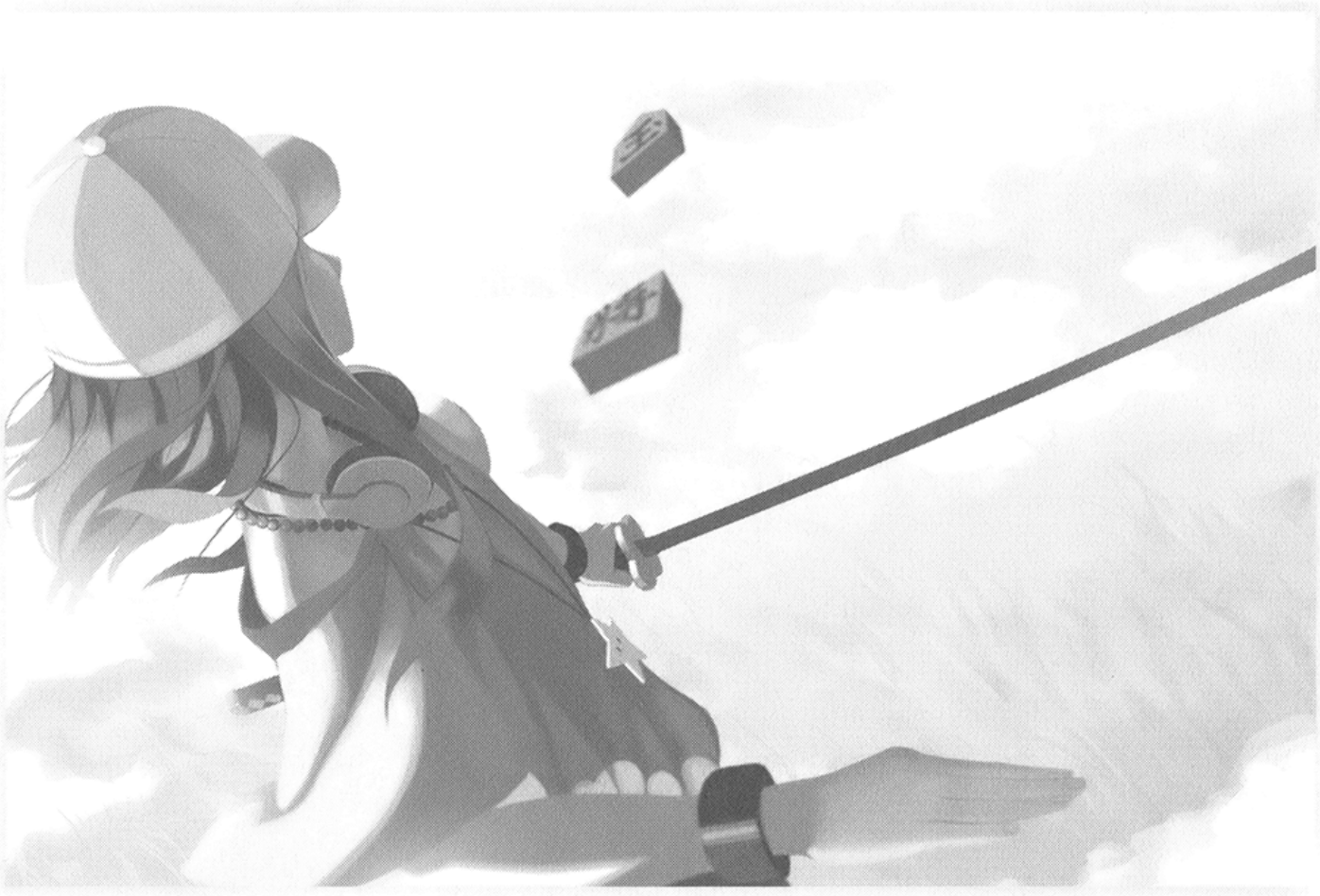
Without leaving a shadow or a trace, she had disappeared.

"Huh?"

For her to disappear without saying a single parting word—and for her to disappear while leaving Ononoki-chan behind, there was no way that was the case.

"Huh…?"

To be continued.



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

3
March

Koyomi Dead

001

As for what Gaen Izuko thought of paths, I had no idea—or rather, I knew absolutely nothing about her at all. Though she was the one to boldly declare, to majestically assert, that she knew everything, I knew nothing about her—at best, I knew that she was ‘senior’ to Oshino Meme, Kaiki Deishuu, and Kagenui Yozuru, as well as Kanbaru Suruga’s 'aunt’, but that was it. If I called that level of information 'knowing’ about her, then that would end up meaning that I knew just about everyone.

Of course, in today’s society, you can just about become friends with anyone if you call each other nicknames or know their phone numbers, so in that respect, I could certainly be called an acquaintance of hers, and if anything Gaen Izuko called me her 'friend’.

Though she didn’t know me that well.

Or did she know?

After all, if she knew everything—then she must know about me as well.

Even if that was the case—it wasn’t all that strange.

Even if I accounted for a millionth of a percent of the knowledge she was endowed with, it wouldn’t be that strange—although, that would mean that she had a grasp of who I was, which didn’t make me particularly feel good about it.

Because her grasp, in a way far different from Hanekawa Tsubasa, was closer to a seizing—that’s what separated Hanekawa Tsubasa who 'only knew what she knew’ from Gaen Izuko who 'knew everything’.

It’s easier to understand if I compare it to shogi.

If my level of understanding was knowing how each piece could move—then Hanekawa knew how all the pieces could move as 'one army’. That was her grasp of things—she could combine and connect her information.

She could link different bits of information.

That would be what I could call an intellectual.

I could also say it was the difference between trivia and knowledge—however, if you wanted to know what it was like in Gaen Izuko’s case, then she had an understanding of not just her own side, but the enemy’s side as well—no, she didn’t even one-sidedly think of the other side as the enemy. She included the pieces on the other side and called it 'one army'—'one unit’.

That was what seizing was.

They were in the palm of her hand.

They were completely in her control.

In a sense, you could say she was an all-rounder that you could seat at either the head or the foot of the table, or place in either the vanguard or the rear guard—but treating her as 'one of them' didn't just not feel good, it simply felt bad. Even if she called you a 'friend', you were nothing more than a shogi piece with the word 'friend' carved into it.

Friends had their uses.

Friends had their purposes.

That was all there was to it.

That was all there was, and that was only what there was.

Although I didn't exactly know how the 'friend' shogi piece was supposed to move—

002

"The answer is for you to die."

"Eh?"

"By sacrificing the rook, I can attack the king—although it's nothing really like that."

"Eh? Eh?"

"Don't worry, it'll only hurt for a moment~."

Gaen-san said, and swung her sword.

I remembered seeing that sword before.

No, it was a little wrong to say that I'd seen it before—considerably wrong. It wasn't that I had seen that sword itself before, but that it resembled something that I knew.

Resembled?

Saying that was also wrong.

Rather than saying it resembled it, it looked exactly like what I was thinking of—but the sword that I had seen before, that I had known before, that I had killed and been killed by, had been a replica.

Now.

The sword she was swinging was—real.

The sword—that was called the Oddity Killer.

The Oddity Killer.

The original Oddity Killer—that should have been annihilated long ago.

That sword.

The real sword—cut me down.

My fingers, my wrists, my elbows, my two arms, my shoulders, my ankles, my shins, my knees, my thighs, my hips, my waist, my stomach, my chest, my collarbone, my neck, my throat, my chin, my nose, my eyes, my brain, my head—she cut them.

She cut them up into round slices.

In an instant.

I tried to scream—but the mouth and throat and lungs that would allow me to scream had already been sliced up into rings like in a ring toss.

She hadn't been lying when she was it would only be a moment, but Gaen-san had still made a pretty big lie—at that speed.

At that sword speed.

I didn't even feel any pain.

003

Let's go back.

Let's go back in time—and climb the mountain road.

On the day of the exam for my first-choice school, March 13th, early in the morning, I had climbed the mountain staircase that lead to the North White Snake Shrine that was at the peak—it had already become a habit that had occurred for a month.

A habit.

In the case where you did it every day, you could say it was a daily routine.

Well, since I went trekking, or went trail running, every day, it was good for my health—but to readily follow my routine without even thinking about it on an important day that could influence the rest of my life, I might actually be a pretty diligent person.

Being diligent was not necessarily a virtue, though, and in this case, I might simply be pulled along by not knowing when to quit…

You could almost call it a bad habit—maybe even a vice.

In any event, Hanekawa Tsubasa, whose diligence was far stronger than mine, had already told me that there was no meaning in searching the North White Snake Shrine any more, and if I was going to look then I should look somewhere else—and Ononoki-chan didn't even seem to be concerned from the start, but I refused to give up… I had ended up making daily visits to the North White Snake Shrine.

Though there was no god anymore.

Of course, there was no middle school girl here.

And—there was no specialist here, on the grounds.

"…Well, I suppose it's natural for a vampire to not know when to give up—"

They're immortal, after all.

Although in my case, instead of being immortal, I was just at the level of not being reflected in mirrors—it was an undead quality that was completely useless, or rather a complete annoyance.

But anyway.

Kagenui Yozuru had disappeared from the North White Snake Shrine—she had disappeared without any words of parting, and since then, almost a month had passed.

Without anything happening.

Uneventfully—a month was about to pass.

If it was like this, then—it would be right to think that, like Oshino, Kagenui-san had simply wrapped up her business in this town, and had gone with the wind, not having a permanent home in the first place, but that wasn't the case.

That couldn't be the case.

Because unlike Oshino, Kagenui-san hadn't done anything she had to do—and although saying that she hadn't done it was based on my own narrow outlook, and she may have actually done it and finished it… Even if she had managed to take down some great evil in that single night.

There was no way that Kagenui-san—the onmyouji, Kagenui Yozuru.

Would leave without taking her shikigami, Ononoki Yotsugi.

"Well, she's done that before, you know? Onee-chan is pretty easygoing when it comes to that. There have been times when she would leave me in the bottom of some valley in the middle of nowhere and forget and have to come back."

…No.

Even though Ononoki-chan herself said that… Even the situation that led to forgetting her in the bottom of a valley was completely mysterious.

"Well, leaving me at the bottom of a valley is different from leaving me at oni-i-chan's house…"

It was a bit unexpected to hear that my house was more of a danger zone than the bottom of a valley, but in any case, even Ononoki-chan at least thought there was a problem.

Though she wasn't particularly worried.

Certainly—it was natural that, from Ononoki-chan's point of view, she wasn't important enough to worry about Kagenui-san.

After all, she was a person more frightening than Oshino or Kaiki—it was possible that she was the only person in this world that could settle anything with violence.

Why was someone like me worried about someone like her? Why was I concerned for her? It could be just a whim for her—or at most, she had left the shrine to avoid our plans to meet.

…To the point that she wouldn't return.

A month since then, I had told myself that that was what it was, but even so, I had, against my better judgment, without giving up, unhonorably—gone to the shrine day by day.

Almost like I was trying to accomplish a hundred days' worship.

"Unhonorably isn't even a word, is it…"

That wasn't good.

Even though I had an exam today, I was losing confidence in myself—well, at any rate, Senjougahara, who had already been accepted via recommendation, was going to escort me to the university, so I had to get off this mountain before our meeting time.

…For her to think that she needed to escort me to the university wasn't giving me a whole lot of credit, but Senjougahara had said,

"Like how a dog that walks can run into a pole, if Araragi-kun walks on a path, he'll encounter an oddity."

So that was the case.

Well, it was a wise saying.

My girlfriend observed all the points that needed to be observed—she was watching whenever I expected her to.

"You're already on the line to success in terms of grades, Araragi-kun, so as long as you can avoid any trouble that keeps you from taking the exam itself, then the campus life is already here."

That's what she said.

I don't know how much I could believe in her when she said I was already on the line to success, but I had had enough of the life where me somehow missing the exam was more worrisome than the exam itself.

Well.

To be climbing a mountain the day of an exam like this, I certainly had had enough—

"…But, after the exam, it's the graduation ceremony, huh. I wonder how that'll be."

As I climbed the steps that didn't put too much strain on my legs as I had gotten used to them, I muttered to myself. Of course, Shinobu was in my shadow, but it seemed she had gone to bed early, so there was no response—as I was together with Shinobu around the clock, whatever I said wasn't really 'talking to myself', strictly speaking, but if she wasn't listening, then I may as well call it that.

I wonder how that'll be.

That didn't exactly have the nuance of an optimistic outlook on the future—if I had to say it, then it would have more of a nuance of a kind of despair on whether or not I'd be able to live a proper campus life.

Together with an oddity, and even turning into an oddity myself, would I be able to carry out a proper lifestyle?—good grief.

Though it wasn't like I intended on relying on her, as Kagenui-san had disappeared, I had become a bit discouraged in regards to that—I had felt really supported in the fact that I could go to her for advice when I had realized that I myself was turning into an oddity.

But that support had completely fallen away.

That could be the real reason why I was visiting the shrine on a daily basis—pretending to be concerned for Kagenui-san, and pitying myself in the process.

It wasn't like Kagenui-san had done anything in particular to help me with the problem of my body… But her unusual, overconfident, brazen attitude made me relieved just by being next to her—she was a true advocate of justice, unshaking.

Karen had run into her once before, too—although, that wasn't all.

Even though she had some strange restriction based in some curse that kept her from touching the ground—the fact that she was still able to composedly carry out her life despite it acted as a compass pointer for me, and if that 'composure' had been threatened somehow—it was only natural for me to be frightened as well.

"But… It's hard to assume that there was someone or something that could threaten Kagenui-san in the first place… Even if there was something like that, what would the reason be? Could it be related to the series of events that are occurring recently…?"

……

/The series of events that are occurring/—I wasn't sure if that was the correct way to describe it at the present time. It might not be 'occurring', in the present tense—it was possible that I could say 'occurred', in the past tense.

At the very least, in the month after Kagenui-san had vanished, nothing had happened in this town—not one single mysterious thing had occurred.

A month was about to pass uneventfully, without anything happening—that wasn't just a phrase, but the actual truth.

Without any oddities.

Not even the 'darkness'.

No urban legends.

No street gossip.

No idle rumors.

And naturally, no school ghost stories—nothing.

Not even the mysterious things, peculiar things, strange things that Oshino would have collected if he was here—nothing like that.

As if everything had ended.

It was as if everything had ended.

“Although if I had to say it then, the question of why Kagenui-san disappeared still remains—”

And then.

As I reached the top of the stairs and went to pass under the shrine gate of the North White Snake Shrine—I saw her.

In the middle of the grounds.

On the exact center of the shrine road—the place where the god traveled, I saw a single woman standing, not particularly minding or caring.

She was wearing baggy clothing.

Her hat was worn deeply—and her age couldn’t be identified just by looking at her.

“……Gaen-san.”

A month where nothing had occurred.

The daily visits that had become a routine.

However, it seemed that my hundred days’ worship that could only be thought of as futile was, in actuality, not futile at all.

Something was about to happen.

A conclusive something—no.

It was possible, maybe, that something was about to end.

004

“Heya, Koyomin—good morning.”

Said Gaen-san.

Said Gaen Izuko.

It wasn’t anything special, just a regular greeting—I assumed that no matter where she was, she would greet people like that. Whether it was on a public road, or at a shrine on top of a mountain.

If there was anything like a special location or a special situation for her, it was questionable—it was possible that nothing in this world could be considered special to her.

Because she knew everything—so everything was the same.

“It’s been a while—when was the last time we saw each other? That’s right, it was in September, wasn’t it? Hoho, although I’ve heard some news about you since then…”

“…Good morning.”

I bowed my head.

Well, lots of stuff had happened with her—but in general, she was ultimately my benefactor. The same as Oshino, who she was senior to.

No.

Far from just feeling obligated to her, I owed a huge debt to her more than Oshino in the sense that I had done a great injustice to her, almost a betrayal—it wasn't on the level of a guilty conscience, but I still felt small in her presence, and couldn't meet eyes with her.

That's why, when confronted without prior notice like this—I couldn't hold my head up high.

But Gaen-san, on the other hand, didn't seem to hold any ill feelings for me whatsoever, and was grinning just as she had the last time we met—well, in her case, she was capable of using and abandoning the people around her with a grin on her face, so that didn't exactly fill me with confidence.

Like Sengoku and Hachikuji—if I consider what happened to Sengoku Nadeko and Hachikuji Mayoi, then I should have every reason to get angry with her… But I knew that that anger, as it was, would be misdirected.

As it was.

"It's gotten pretty serious, hasn't it?—your body. Koyomin."

"Well… It's something that's still manageable."

"Hoho. I suppose, well, considering all the crises that you've managed to struggle through up until now, your current physical situation… Your condition isn't something to be feared. What's gotten pretty serious is—"

Gaen-san pointed behind her.

Right now, the only thing behind her was the newly constructed shrine—an empty construction, without any object of worship.

In a sense, it wasn't much different from the wooden shed that I had built in class all that time ago—although if I said that, the carpenter who built the shrine might get angry at me.

"To think that it would be Yozuru."

"……"

"Kagenui Yozuru—my beloved junior. To think that she would be targeted—really, it was unexpected. Even for me."

"…Aren't you supposed to be able to expect anything?"

She was targeted.

It wasn't like I had no reaction to those blunt words—but what was more surprising to me was to hear the word 'unexpected' coming from Gaen-san's mouth.

No, it wasn't a surprise.

I just thought that 'she was lying'.

“You know everything, don’t you?”

“Now, now, what’s with the sarcasm towards a friend you haven’t seen in a while, Koyomin? There’s no way a person that knows everything actually exists. It’s just rhetoric, you see, rhetoric. I just say it to say it, almost like a bluff~.”

“……”

I couldn’t read her true intentions.

I hadn’t really been able to tell what Oshino had been thinking—and Kaiki and Kagenui-san weren’t the kinds of people that you could read, either, but I could really tell that she was the upperclassman to these people.

No…

There was something wrong with that.

The unreadability of Oshino and the others and the unreadability of Gaen-san were of different types—at the very least, I couldn’t say they were the same.

For the junior generation of Oshino Meme, Kaiki Deishuu, and Kagenui Yozuru, even though it’s hard to clearly put into words, they showed some sort of commonality.

For them.

You couldn’t tell what they were thinking.

In other words—you couldn’t read them.

However… In Gaen-san’s case, it wasn’t exactly that you couldn’t tell what she was thinking—it was more, you didn’t want to know what she was thinking.

In other words—you couldn’t read her.

You didn’t read her.

You didn’t want to read her—but I wasn’t saying 'you didn’t want to read her’ in the sense that you didn’t want to read her because her head was full of detestable evil.

If I meant that, then I would want to read the inside of Kaiki’s head even less—it was simply that Gaen-san’s head was so complex and mysterious that, if I tried to read her, it would feel like my own brain would burst.

That’s why.

In a kind of self-preservation, I didn’t want to try and read Gaen Izuko’s true intentions—the same way nobody would try and take the punch of a heavyweight boxer when there was no need for it.

However… There might be a need for it right now.

If she had appeared like this.

If she had approached me of her own accord like this—she would only have come to see me if there was a need for it.

At the very least, Gaen-san seemed like she had known that I would come to the shrine in spite of the fact that I had an exam today, as if it was on an itinerary, and came to ambush me—if she had said 'there isn't anything that I don't know' instead of 'there is something that I don't know', then I would've felt more relieved and be more receptive.

In other words… It's even scarier.

If there was some sort of situation progressing through this town that not even Gaen-san could seize hold of—I would much rather prefer that it was just rhetoric, or a practical joke between friends… Or even humility.

I wanted her to make me think that.

"Don't make that face. You're not supposed to make that face to your friends, Koyomin—when I say unexpected, in this case, I'm saying it was like having five sides of a die marked with '1', but the die ended up rolling a '6'. I had understood that there was a probability of rolling a '6'… But the probability was so low that it wasn't likely to happen, from what I knew."

"……"

"I didn't think there would be someone that would make a move against the embodiment of violence, Kagenui Yozuru—that's why I had sent her to deal with the abnormal situation regarding your body."

"Someone that would make a move—the way you say it makes me curious."

To the doubt that I warily put forth, Gaen-san went,

"Hm?"

and tilted her head in confusion.

As if it was on purpose.

"What do you mean, Koyomin?"

"Well, that is… I'm very grateful that you sent Kagenui-san."

That's right.

I should have given her my thanks to Gaen-san immediately after meeting her—although, in the current state where her subordinate Kagenui-san had gone missing, maybe I should've given her an apology instead of thanks.

However, before giving an apology and before giving thanks.

I had questioned her.

"Hahaha, stop it, Koyomin. They do say that you should have good manners even between friends, but that's such a formal saying, and it's totally unnecessary between you and me. So, what do you mean?"

Even while speaking as if she was avoiding it, Gaen-san didn't stray from the main point and repeated the question. Rather than it being the art of conversation, it felt more like a procedure.

“…Someone that would make a move—what I mean is, I had had a different impression of Kagenui-san. In this situation, wouldn’t you normally say something like, someone who would take her out?”

“I see. I suppose it’s my unwavering faith in Kagenui’s strength—although, you’re the one who’s actually fought Kagenui before, so perhaps you’re qualified to cast doubt on that. Since you recklessly challenged Kagenui over summer break, right—so there already was someone who would make a move against her.”

“……”

“What, it wasn’t like I’d forgotten about that—it’s just that I have more faith in Kagenui’s strength than you do. I do know that there’s always somebody stronger—or rather, that strength is never absolute. Even if the probability is low—you know?”

Gaen-san beckoned to me.

Beckoned?

Though I wondered why, it turned out that that it was hard to have a conversation with the shrine gate between us.

I readied myself and crossed through the shrine gate.

The meaning of Gaen-san’s words changed depending on if you thought that there was someone stronger than Kagenui-san in terms of violence, or there was a way to negate her strength—well, no matter what she meant—

“Are you saying that you can’t believe that there’d be someone who would take the risk and make a move against Kagenui-san?”

That was it.

That was the doubt I had.

No matter what the reason—I’d think someone would try and confront Kagenui-san. To confront the embodiment of violence—in my case, the life of my sister had been at stake.

Maybe that was what had a 'low probability’ for Gaen-san… But it was just simply my lack of gauging the enemy, and if I had had an understanding of how much power Kagenui-san held, then I may have chosen a different tactic. No, even if that wasn’t the case—if it weren’t for Shinobu, I probably wouldn’t have gotten the guts to face Kagenui-san.

And, as compensation for my reliance on Shinobu, I had started to lose my humanity—and not my humanity in a psychological sense, but my humanity in a physical sense.

……

That could be it. Instead of guessing at the reason for making a move on Kagenui-san—what actually made a move could be this paid compensation.

Someone.

Gaen-san had used a personifying description as if it was a matter of course—and normally, it would just be a simple figure of speech, and a misspeak that held no significance, but because Gaen-san had used it, I didn't think that was the case.

Basically, the line of thought that said that Kagenui-san left the shrine of her own free will—had been completely wiped out.

Someone—you normally used it to refer to a person, but it could also refer to an oddity—or perhaps even something beyond that.

What exactly was Gaen-san referring to when she used 'someone'?

"Well, she was a specialist with that way of life, that way of fighting—it was true that she could easy gain the resentment of others. However, it wasn't as if she was claiming justice just for show or on a whim. Though she was resented, she would never be unjustly resented, I'd think."

"....."

As someone who was taking care of two sisters that claimed justice just for show and on a whim, it was a little painful to listen to.

"Basically, you're saying that you think Kagenui-san herself wasn't the source of the trouble."

"Rather than that being what I think, that's the truth, Koyomin—by the way, how's Yotsugi doing?"

"Eh?"

I was a little surprised at how the topic suddenly changed—but, because Gaen-san was the one doing it, it was surely a necessary procedure.

Even though I had no idea what she intended from the procedure, and even as I thought that following her intent would be dangerous, even as I understood that—while not being able to read, not reading, Gaen-san's true intentions, I responded. Ononoki-chan's first guardian was of course Kagenui-san, but considering Ononoki-chan's origins, Gaen-san was also one of her guardians in a broader sense—as her guardian, she had the right to know the situation of those she was guarding.

"She's... fine. Since she doesn't have any facial expressions, I don't really know how she feels about this case... But she's the one that knows the most about Kagenui-san. It doesn't seem like she's worried—at the moment."

I figured that telling her that she had demanded an outrageous amount of ice cream wasn't exactly helpful information, so I ended my status update of Ononoki-chan at that.

Well, I figured that's all she wanted to hear.

"She's the one who knows the most about Kagenui-san? Haha... You don't know anything, do you, Koyomin?"

"Eh?"

"Well, it's completely fine as long as you don't pretend to know about Yotsugi, who's an oddity~."

By the way, since I know everything, I naturally know about Yotsugi as well.

Said Gaen-san—she was unexpectedly someone who liked to brag a lot. Well, seeing as I knew absolutely nothing about Ononoki-chan, that was essentially the case.

Even though we've already spent a month living under the same roof, all I knew about that girl was that she liked ice cream. If I had to pick, I'd say that that information was not something I needed.

"Although, since you're turning into an oddity as well, it's not like you won't be able to understand her since she's also an oddity—but in the end, two oddities being able to understand each other is just an illusion."

"Hah… Well, there is a lot of discord between Ononoki-chan and Shinobu."

Thanks to that, the Araragi room in the Araragi household didn't have a particularly good atmosphere—at first, the squabling just wouldn't die out, but now it was a cold war status, and we were at a non-communication lifestyle between Ononoki-chan, who moved during the day, and Shinobu, who was nocturnal.

It was honestly pretty stressful, and in the recent studying I've done—though my studying was in its final stages, I couldn't exactly say I made a lot of progress in that last spurt.

"And Yotsugi's unique even among oddities—in that she's manmade."

"Manmade…"

"She was pretty calm even when confronting Tadatsuru, wasn't she? We've tested it out before—we ordered her to fight against Kagenui."

Gaen-san was saying these unbelievable things so casually.

"I had thought that it was possible that she may have humanlike emotions—I didn't think the probability was that low at the time, but she then she attacked 'onee-chan' without any hesitation."

"……"

"Well, as for that battle itself, Kagenui was the winner. Even though you could stop Yotsugi if you ordered her to, not doing so was very much like Kagenui—ah, no need to worry, Koyomin. Even though I brought this up so suddenly, it's not like I'm saying that Ononoki Yotsugi is the culprit behind Kagenui's disappearance."

Gaen-san was quick to dispel the doubt that had crossed my mind ever so slightly—as if casually implying that pointless endeavors were not allowed, like some sort of constructed shogi puzzle.

"As long as she isn't ordered to—as long as she isn't employed, she would never appear to act that way."

"Well—I suppose so."

As Gaen-san said that she would never appear to act that way rather than she would never act that way, I realized that Ononoki-chan's individuality, her free will, wasn't completely denied—but certainly, with Tadatsuru… When considering Ononoki-chan's

state when she was confronting, opposing him, it seemed that what Gaen-san was saying was basically true.

Just as she had no facial expressions.

She had no emotions—and of course, no passion.

“That’s actually the reason why—Kagenui was eliminated, you see.”

“Eh… Eliminated?”

I was getting impatient with myself for reacting to each and every word that Gaen-san said—since I couldn’t read her intentions, I at least wished I could have prepared in advance when facing her in order to converse with some composure.

Without some sort of dignity like Hanekawa, I guess I couldn’t face Gaen-san… Although a conversation between Hanekawa and Gaen-san felt like it would be beyond my capabilities.

“What do you mean when you say eliminated?”

“Like I said before, Kagenui’s disappearance wasn’t caused by Kagenui herself or anything like that, Koyomin—in the first place, she was barely related to the series of stories unfolding in this town. She had nearly gotten involved in the story regarding your sister, Koyomin, but that was avoided by your own efforts.”

Although rather than avoided, it was more like rejected, said Gaen-san.

“That’s why I had sent her this time… Well, I guess it was more deeply rooted than I thought. More than I thought.”

“When you say it was more than you thought—even if it was more deeply rooted than you thought, did it still go according to what you knew?”

“Don’t turn on me, Koyomin—it’s not like I’m incapable of being hurt, especially when my cute junior got mixed in with your troubles, Koyomin.”

“……”

“Ah, I suppose you could say Kagenui got mixed in, but the one who was dragged in was Kaiki—I wonder what actually happened to him? I’ve heard various things that are making it complicated, and though I know all of it—the problem is that they could be false rumors. And the majority are probably false rumors spread by Kaiki himself—it’s really annoying to the senior if her junior is disloyal. And as for Oshino—haha.”

After bringing up Oshino, Gaen-san simply stopped with a light laugh. No, for me, that wasn’t something you could just laugh off—definitely for Oshino, but also for Kagenui-san—and even for Kaiki.

“Hm? No, no, Kaiki is just paying for his mistakes, so don’t worry about him—although, in terms of your personality, Koyomin, that might not be possible for you. But don’t worry. And Oshino, too—but for Kagenui, it might be better to make things clear for the sake of the future. For the sake of your future, Koyomin, and the future of this town.”

“Mine…?”

“Yes. For the sake of Koyomin now and afterwards. But… You don’t have to shoulder the problems of the town on your own. As for why Kagenui was elimiated.

Said Gaen-san.

"It’s because she was simply in the way—not Kagenui Yozuru herself, but her shikigami Ononoki Yotsugi. Who was stationed near you, Koyomin. That’s why, in order to make that shikigami and tsukumogami doll powerless and ineffective, the master was taken care of instead. Ononoki Yotsugi, the shikigami who could only take orders and be employed. By taking out the master at the top of the chain of command, then there’d be no need to be afraid of that posed look girl~.”

Taken care of.

With those blunt words—my heart began to pound.

It hurt.

005

“Gaen-san… When you say taken care of…”

“Taken care of. Well, from Kagenui’s point of view, they didn’t really take good care of her, did they?—although, she wasn’t just here for the sake of her work, so it would be unrefined to press me on that matter.”

Said Gaen-san.

By here, it could have the narrow meaning of the ‘North White Snake Shrine’, but it could also have the wider meaning of 'this town’ as well.

Kagenui-san’s so-called 'work'—she had commented that her work as a specialist was about my physical problems, so that was true—the thing with Tadatsuru-san came after that, so staying even after that could only be irregular for her.

“In other words, her private time—not of professional concern, but of personal concern. Though she isn’t the type of person to act based on curiosity. Well, since there was Tadatsuru, who had curiosity that wasn’t intellectual but aesthetic, so it probably made her sentimental. …I don’t think she would have Yotsugi stay at your house, Koyomin, out of concern. …Or I’d like to think that.”

I’d like to think that, she said.

Please don’t say the possibility of that was 'low but still capable of happening’, Gaen-san.

“Sending Yotsugi into your home, Koyomin, was kind of a surprising decision, although she is capable of protecting you as a genuine manmade oddity—but it seemed there was someone who didn’t particularly like that.”

“Didn’t like that…”

Someone.

“Well, even so, that person wouldn’t make a move on Yotsugi herself—since she is a genuine oddity. That’s why she went after her master instead. Why someone made a move—the reason someone made a move was this.

Someone.

Someone who didn’t like it—someone who made a move.

Gaen-san kept repeating that—almost as if she was trying to hint at something.

"From here, the story can diverge into two possible paths—Yotsugi remains a powerless, meaningless bodyguard just as it was planned—or somehow, Yotsugi awakens to human nature and ends up protecting Koyomin of her own free will… Though she would lose sight of the oddity part of her.”

“……”

“As for what would happen if she lost sight of the oddity part of her, I don’t need to explain it to you, do I? Since you should’ve seen it with your own eyes~.”

If that happened.

If Ononoki Yotsugi stopped being a genuine oddity—she would be something that you could lay a hand on, and you wouldn’t need to fear her.

Gaen-san’s tone of voice implied that—I see, when she told me like that, I could finally see Kagenui-san’s sudden disappearance as something rational… After all.

Tadatsuru-san’s case was like that as well.

There were two possible ways it could have gone—the path where, in order to save the 'hostages’, I further advanced my vampirism, and the path where Ononoki-chan fell into violence to protect me—to manifest her nature as an oddity.

That oddity nature.

The path that would destroy the relationship that may have been built between me and Ononoki-chan—that was the path that had eventually been taken, but that felt more like a story of my mentality.

Of what I felt.

After that, due to Kagenui-san’s arragement, I had begun to live together with her to erase that situation—so that’s why I could take the viewpoint I had now without any problems.

Or rather.

That’s why Kagenui-san had been eliminated—why the 'someone’ that Gaen-san mentioned had turned Ononoki-chan into just a doll that was close to me.

…However, I didn’t understand.

It felt like I understood and didn’t at the same time—what was the reason for going so far? It felt like they were trying to keep me from doing something… Or were they trying to get me to do something?

Either way… It didn't make me feel any better.

As if attacking me through my surroundings—in order to isolate me.

At this rate, the vampirification of my body—my changing into an oddity could also have been planned—I couldn't say that thinking that way was totally due to a persecution complex.

If it weren't for what happened to Sengoku—if it weren't for what happened to this shrine, then I wouldn't have relied on Shinobu so excessively—what about Shinobu?

What would happen to Shinobu in this situation?

Shinobu was more of a bodyguard for me than Ononoki-chan was, after all—ah, that was it, since I couldn't advance my turning into an oddity any further, that means I couldn't rely on Shinobu any further… so she was, in a way, rendered powerless just like Ononoki-chan.

The fact that I couldn't gain any strength from it.

Meant that Shinobu couldn't gain any strength, either.

In reality, she was essentially an oddity that had been wrung out—a mere shadow of her former self. Just a blonde little girl—for me, or even for herself, she couldn't be a trump card.

Not a trump card, or a blade that can cut—

"…As for Shinobu-chan."

It seemed she had noticed that my thoughts had fallen on Shinobu—or rather, Gaen-san had guided my thoughts over to Shinobu in the first place.

That was probably why Gaen-san had been glancing away from me towards my shadow since a while ago.

"Is she sleeping soundly at the moment, Koyomin?"

"Yes… She's been completely nocturnal recently."

Because of Ononoki-chan, though I didn't say it out loud. It felt more like, instead of Ononoki-chan avoiding Shinobu, Shinobu was avoiding Ononoki-chan—

"She's usually asleep around this time, at least."

"Hoho. Well, it does sound like something she might think of—trying to draw closer to the essence of being an oddity, in case an emergency happens. Although, it doesn't have much meaning, since she's already started to go away from being an oddity… Which means you can't go back to being a human, either, Koyomin."

It seems she's being optimistic or it's just wishful thinking… But Shinobu-chan was really clinging to some hope—said Gaen-san. The way she said it felt like she was pitying me, but it also felt like she was just simply stating the facts to make her come to her senses.

If she was simply stating the fact that what Shinobu was doing and how Shinobu felt was worthless and pointless—I wasn't really capable of pressing the matter, not having noticed Shinobu's concerns in the first place.

"Or rather—Koyomin's ever-growing predicament may go into its final stage."

"Eh? Ever-growing predicament?"

"Hoho. Well, the Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade right now who is no longer completely immortal or completely a vampire, at any rate, cannot protect you twenty-four hours a day—so you aren't really protected against assassination. As a comparison, it's almost as absurd as trying to win in shogi without having any of your pieces taken—regardless of how many titles the player may have, regardless of if the opponent is just a kid that doesn't fully understand the rules, it's impossible to win in shogi without losing a single piece. Even if you're a proud, passionate commander, there are still pieces that must be sacrificed—that's what I'm talking about, Koyomin."

"…If you try to protect a pawn, you'll lose your king—is what you're saying?"

"It's not just limited to pawns. There's a phrase that goes, you may favor the more powerful rook over the weaker king—but whether it's the rook or the bishop, the gold general or the silver general, they'll all possible sacrifies in the end. The only piece that can't be sacrificed is the king."

"……"

"If you think about it, it's a strange game. In shogi—even if all the pieces except for the king are taken, as long as the king survives, you can still win. The game balance is very strange. It's very interesting. Nothing in the world is really analogous to that—but anyway, Koyomin. Do you believe you yourself are the king?"

Having a question suddenly posed to me like this, without having the time to think about it,

"Ah, no—I couldn't possibly,"

was my answer. Maybe I should've given the answer more serious thought, but I didn't have such a personality that I would believe myself to be a king. Even if the vampire was the ruler of all oddities.

"That's completely unthinkable, being a king."

"Right, you're very modest like that. So there's no king in this town—neither you, nor Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade is the king. And Sengoku Nadeko—"

Like she had done before.

Gaen-san turned around to look at the shrine behind her.

"—is not the king either."

"……"

"Right now, the throne is vacant, in this town—that's why so many problems are occurring. It's like a game of shogi without the king. Haha, I've heard of games where

you played without the rook or the bishop, but it's unusual to play shogi without the king, isn't it? How would you decide who the victor is then?"

"At that point—there's no winner or loser, isn't there? Since there are no conditions for victory or defeat—"

"That's right, it's a situation with no winner or loser. People would call that a lawless zone. …It's not like the king needs to be the strongest piece. They just need to exist. As long as they're there, things will settle down—even if it's on a battlefield."

"…Even if you compare the town to shogi, I'm not really sure I understand. Even if you say it's a battlefield."

I spoke my honest feelings.

Or you could say I was informing her of my honest feelings—although, I wasn't completely sure if you could call them my honest feelings.

It could be that I didn't want to understand.

A vacant throne.

The one who said that for a chaotic state to arise, a blank space is needed—as I recall, it was Kaiki.

"Speaking of which, Kagenui-san also talked about shogi… Were Kaiki and Oshino and Kagenui-san the kinds of people that played with shogi puzzles?"

"Haha. Even shogi puzzles are hard without the king."

"…In shogi puzzles, you only need one king, right? Even if one of the thrones is vacant—"

"Shogi puzzles with two kings do exist, but that's not the subject here."

Though I had instinctively sensed danger, she was trying to avoid the subject—Gaen-san wouldn't allow any digression.

"Well, comparing the town to shogi was more for the sake of showing off. It wasn't really to make it any easier to understand."

"……"

"Using the example of a god instead of a king would be more in line with my habits—but there's no god piece in shogi, after all. Now, in order to progress the conversation further, Oshino was able to bring spiritual stability to the town despite the vacancy—what I want to do is fill up that vacancy, if by appearance only. I entrusted that to you, Koyomin, and you failed. That's how it's been so far, correct?"

"Well… If you wanted to summarize it easily, then it would be something like that. However, with all the things that have happened around me, it's not that simple of a—"

"It may not be simple, but it's not complicated, either. Or should I say, it hasn't gotten as far as being complicated. Really, I had hoped that putting Yotsugi close to you as a restraint would work—but it doesn't seem to have worked. Kagenui has gone missing—

Kaiki isn't showing his face—and Oshino's whereabouts are unknown, so the situation is at a dead end. I had no choice but to personally act."

"…What do you mean by act?"

Gaen-san wasn't the kind of person to act unless absolutely necessary.

It was the same, the last time she came to this town.

For her to be lying in wait for me—there was a reason for it, too. It wasn't like she had told me about the situation in this town just as helpful advice.

I could be the kind of person that you would want to give helpful advice to because I knew absolutely nothing—but this person wasn't someone that would move for just that reason.

"In this situation where the damage keeps increasing, I'd like to put a lid on it, Koyomin. So instead of saying I was going to act, I could say I'd like to put an end to these actions—specifically, Koyomin, your actions."

"My…? Um, it's not like I… planned to act or anything. Isn't that why Kagenui-san sent Ononoki-chan to me? As a bodyguard, but also for observation…"

"That's right, I guess you understood that much, Koyomin—but Yotsugi is no longer able to carry out that job. Since the chain of command has been cut. If Yotsugi can no longer protect you—she can't stop you, either. She is, quite literally, a puppet."

Oh, the word for puppet includes the kanji for oni, doesn't it—said Gaen-san.

"So you are now able to act. You're already able to act—and there's no one that can stop you. And the problem is—if you act, the other side will act as well."

"The other side?"

"You don't have to think about who the other side is. In short, it's 'someone'."

Gaen-san spoke to seal my thoughts. And then continued speaking.

"The problem is—it's dangerous for you to act. Or rather, the other side is waiting for you to act—it's a duel-like situation where the first to act becomes the loser. Almost a dilemma."

"A dilemma… Of what and what, exactly?"

"I can see a solution strategy for it, but carrying it out is a little painful."

A solution strategy…?

A solution strategy for what?

It was true that various things had happened in this town around me—but all of it, ultimately, had already been resolved.

The ones who had resolved them had all gone missing in the process, which may be the problem—but it wasn't like something could occur because of that.

"Are you curious about what the solution strategy is for? Well, that doesn't really have to do with you anymore~."

Gaen-san moved.

She took a step closer to me.

For her to move, to draw closer to me—of course, there was a reason for it, but—I had no idea what it could be.

Eventually, until she reached me.

I couldn't read her true intentions.

"It's a solution strategy to dispel the 'darkness' that's been coiling around this town—and the answer is for you to die."

"The answer is for you to die."

"Eh?"

"By sacrificing the rook, I can attack the king—although it's nothing really like that."

"Eh? Eh?"

"Don't worry, it'll only hurt for a moment~."

Gaen-san said, and swung her sword.

I remembered seeing that sword before.

No, it was a little wrong to say that I'd seen it before—considerably wrong. It wasn't that I had seen that sword itself before, but that it resembled something that I knew.

Resembled?

Saying that was also wrong.

Rather than saying it resembled it, it looked exactly like what I was thinking of—but the sword that I had seen before, that I had known before, that I had killed and been killed by, had been a replica.

Now.

The sword she was swinging was—real.

The sword—that was called the Oddity Killer.

The Oddity Killer.

The original Oddity Killer—that should have been annihilated long ago.

That sword.

The real sword—cut me down.

My fingers, my wrists, my elbows, my two arms, my shoulders, my ankles, my shins, my knees, my thighs, my hips, my waist, my stomach, my chest, my collarbone, my neck, my throat, my chin, my nose, my eyes, my brain, my head—she cut them.

She cut them up into round slices.

In an instant.

I tried to scream—but the mouth and throat and lungs that would allow me to scream had already been sliced up into rings like in a ring toss.

She hadn't been lying when she was it would only be a moment, but Gaen-san had still made a pretty big lie—at that speed.

At that sword speed.

I didn't even feel any pain.

Before I knew it, she had been holding that sword.

How did she have the Oddity Killer?

While I didn't understand—I had been cut up into small pieces, and scattered across the shrine. Ah, incidentally, hadn't Sengoku once—cut snakes up into pieces like this?

As that came to mind.

I, or the parts that I had been made into, dispersed.

"It's a shame that it had to come to this, I truly think that. However, I want you to know, that I waited until the last minute for this—I waited until the day you had your entrance exams. Because after your exams, your restrictions would be lifted, and it would be uncertain even for me to know how you would act after being released."

It must have been a hallucination that I could hear her voice—there was no way I could, as my hearing organs, and the receiving brain, they had all been sliced up.

"You don't need to worry about whether Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade will revive after your death—I don't know if it'll give you peace of mind, but I'll say it anyway. She's already seen a 'future'—a 'world' where that had taken place. That's why that action—that path has been blocked. Even if she wanted to, she'll be unable to rampage like that. Without the path of rampaging around, the only one left—is suicide."

The suicidal vampire.

What did it mean in terms of how oddities were supposed to be?—whether it was appropriate or not, I couldn't know now—well, even if it wasn't appropriate, if she died regardless, then it was the same. Although I didn't know if dying and—being swallowed by the darkness was the same.

"And this isn't just for peace of mind, but a guarantee—so that the shock of your death is as small as possible to your family and lover and friends, I will personally take responsibility and tell them."

Ah.

If Gaen-san was to take responsibility—then that would be fine. But, in the end—for the half year that I had devoted to my exam studies to go to waste, it was kind of sad.

Really—it was as Senjougahara had said.

For a guy like me, rather than the exam itself, being able to arrive at the exam itself was a bigger barrier—and it seemed I had failed at that.

As the cherry blossoms fell.

Araragi Koyomi fell.

006

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line.

Punch line?

Hold on, I would think being cut up into round slices and scattered across the ground is enough of a punch.

“…Huh?”

I was alive.

I hadn’t died—the sun was right above me.

So roughly six hours had passed since then, and it was already daytime—and in the sunlight, I, who should have been cut into slices, was lying spread-eagled.

What was this?

What happened?

Gaen-san was no longer here.

There were no traces of her at all.

What happened?—hadn’t I been chopped into pieces by the sword that she had wielded? Or had my vampiric immortality brought me back from the brink of death—no, since my blood hadn’t been sucked, that couldn’t have happened.

Gaen-san had targeted me when Shinobu was asleep so that that couldn’t happen even in the worst case—not to mention, even if she had done that, my body wouldn’t have obtained the immortality necessary to revive me from being cut up that far, and I wouldn’t be safely lying beneath the sun like this.

It was, as if—there was some Oddity Reviver alongside the Oddity Killer.

What was going on?

What exactly was going on?—no.

What had Gaen-san—done?

“Ah. Are you awake?”

Someone said.

While I was spread-eagled on the ground without knowing anything, a shadow looked down over me.

“Or perhaps, is this a case of not being able to let sleeping dogs lie?—Rarabai-san.”

“…Don’t say my name like some kind of lullaby—my name is Araragi.”

I almost reflexively responded like that.

I almost reflexively responded to the girl that was looking down over me—to the girl with twintails shouldering a huge knapsack.

But the words couldn't come out.

No, it wasn't that I had forgotten my own name or anything—

"I see. Sorry, I stuttered."

She said, grinning widely—it was a bright smile that I had liked, that I had loved, once before.

That I had missed.

Though I shouldn't have been able to see it again—

"So, is the punch line that Araragi-san couldn't make it to the exam location, and failed the entrance exam?"

"No, a punch line like that wouldn't work at all!"

Afterword

The general idea is that in novels, especially in mystery novels, ‘foreshadowing’ is an important factor on top of the story, and to sum it up roughly, it would be something that makes you think, 'ah, so that’s what that meant back then!’, but I’d say this happens in real life as well. When you think back on it later, you realize that’s what it meant, or when you think back on it now, you realize that’s what it meant, or even though it’s too late to matter, that’s what it actually meant—I’m sure everyone’s had an experience that made them look back on the past. Although, it might be that in most cases, you’ll be looking back on the past with regret—like, if you had realized then, such and such wouldn’t have happened, or something like that?

If things that make you feel 'I should’ve realized back then’ or 'anyone who would’ve noticed would have noticed at that point’ is what foreshadowing is, then then it seems pretty natural for it to come with regret. But honestly, if that means foreshadowing is only the kind of reflection that forces you to take on feelings of regret, then I would hope that isn’t the case. If you asked if 'an event that seems like foreshadowing after looking back on it’ was actually foreshadowing, then if it was a novel, the author might tell you if they were honest, but in real life, there’s really no way to tell. Humans are the kind of living things that find connections between things that aren’t actually connected, so they’re quite capable of saying that anything is 'foreshadowing’ when it comes to interpretation. There’s a theory that, even if they aren’t 'a friend of a friend’, everyone in the world is connected to each other via six degrees of separation. There may be episodes that make you feel like it’s a small world, but if you’re separated by six degrees, is does that really count as a connection? Can you really call those two people connected? Can a 'friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend’ really be considered foreshadowing of a story?

The stories you’ve just read, of course, aren’t any foreshadowing at all, but the second volume of the Monogatari Series Final Season. Originally, the second volume was planned to be 'Owarimonogatari’, but if you asked why this book fell in between 'Tsukimonogatari’ and 'Owarimonogatari’, since we’ve come quite a long way in both volumes and years since the first volume in the series, 'Bakemonogatari’, so my situation as an author was that I felt that the starting point and the present time weren’t very well connected, and wanted to take another look back on the year that Araragi Koyomi spent. So in that sense, this novel was written one hundred percent out of the blue—this was 'Koyomimonogatari’, Koyomi Stone, Koyomi Flower, Koyomi Sand, Koyomi Water, Koyomi Wind, Koyomi Tree, Koyomi Tea, Koyomi Mountain, Koyomi Torus, Koyomi Seed, Koyomi Nothing, and Koyomi Dead.

Since it turned into a collection of short stories, VOFAN-san kindly drew quite a number of illustrations. Thank you very much. The Final Season will now continue after this with 'Owarimonogatari’ and 'Zoku-Owarimonogatari’. Please look forward to it. Well, something may come in between again, but we’ll see.